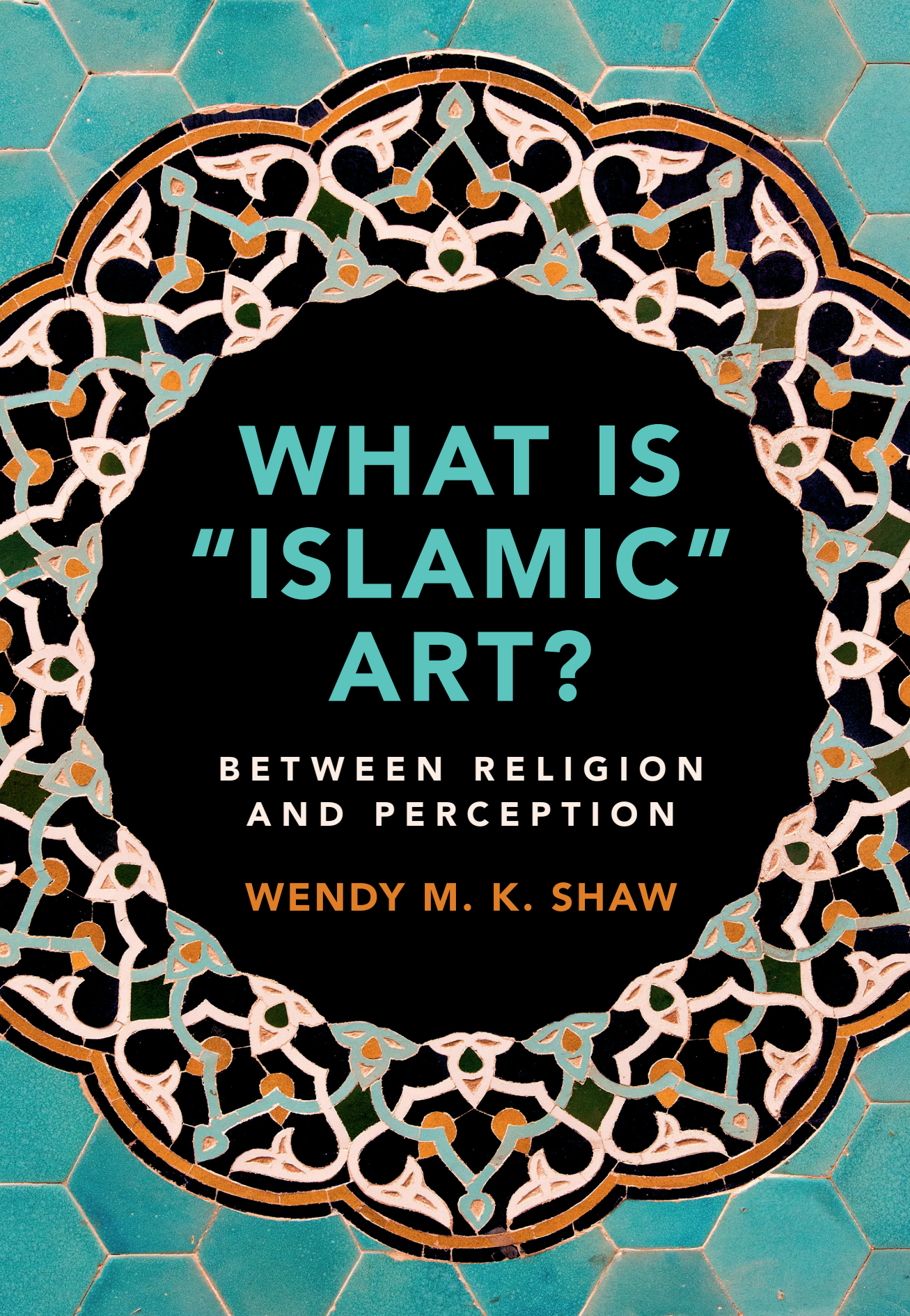




WHAT IS "ISLAMIC" ART?

BETWEEN RELIGION
AND PERCEPTION

WENDY M. K. SHAW

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What is “Islamic” Art?

Revealing what is ‘Islamic’ in Islamic art, Wendy M. K. Shaw explores the perception of arts, including painting, music, and geometry through the discursive sphere of historical Islam including the Qur’an, Hadith, Sufism, philosophy, and poetry. Emphasis on the experience of reception over the context of production enables a new approach, not only to Islam and its arts, but also as a decolonizing model for global approaches to art history.

Shaw combines a concise introduction to Islamic intellectual history with a critique of the modern, secular, and European premises of disciplinary art history. Her meticulous interpretations of intertextual themes span antique philosophies, core religious and theological texts, and prominent prose and poetry in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu that circulated across regions of Islamic hegemony from the eleventh century to the colonial and post-colonial contexts of the modern Middle East.

Wendy M. K. Shaw is Professor of the Art History of Islamic Cultures at the Free University Berlin. Her work explores the historiographic, intellectual, institutional, and physical impact of modernity, colonialism, and identity on the arts in regions of Islamic hegemony, with a particular focus on the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey. She is the author of *Possessors and Possessed: Museums, Archaeology, and the Visualization of History in the Late Ottoman Empire* (2003), and *Ottoman Painting: Reflections of Western Art from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic* (2011).

What is “Islamic” Art?

Between Religion and Perception

WENDY M. K. SHAW

Freie Universität Berlin



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It is, therefore, the task of history, once the other-world of truth has vanished, to establish the truth of this world. It is the immediate task of philosophy, which is in the service of history, to unmask self-estrangement in its unholy forms once the holy form of human self-estrangement has been unmasked.¹

– Karl Marx (1818–1883), A Contribution to the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, 1843

My heart can take on
any form:

a meadow for gazelles,
a cloister for monks,

For the idols, sacred ground,
Ka'ba for the circling pilgrim,
the tables of the Torah,
the scrolls of the Quran.

I profess the religion of love;
Wherever its caravan turns along the way,
that is the belief,
the faith I keep.²

– ibn Arabi (1165–1240), *Stations of Desire*

... perplexity prevails, certainty is hard to come by, and there is no assurance of attaining the object of inquiry. How strong, in addition to all this, is the excuse for the truth to be confused, and how manifest is the proof that certainty is difficult to achieve! For the truths are obscure, the ends hidden, the doubts manifold, the minds turbid, the reasonings various; the premises are gleaned from the senses, and the senses (which are our tools) are not immune from error.³

– ibn al-Haytham (965–1040), Preface to *The Optics*

¹ Marx, 1973: 243. ² Sells, 2000: 72–73. ³ Sabra, 1989: 3.

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Preface

Research often begins by asking one question and ends up answering another. This book began as an exploration of the image in Islam. It ended up exploring how one might relinquish concepts like the image and art to conceive of perception through an Islam, often overshadowed by politics, essential to a sense of emotive knowledge that emerges through engagement with the arts.⁴

Instead of defining the image, art, or religion, this book asks:

What is art if the primary sensory organ is neither eyes nor ears, but the heart?

Where are the boundaries between the senses as we take in the world?

What is art if dreams and visions are as real as materiality?

How can art make-present, and not just re-present?

Exploration of these questions has led me to diverse texts. For me, the measure of my arguments has been the interconnections between disparate elements that corroborate surprising connections and unravel unforeseen ideas. It has been a hard book to stop researching, because so many sources and scholarly works connect to it. This exploration has fascinated me through the work of scholars in a multitude of disciplines who have delved into archives and painstakingly translated manuscripts to assemble the crumbs of the past discarded on the table of history into satisfying meals of narrative. I contribute to this telling of stories in recognition that it is only by building upon each other's expression and experience, admiring in collaboration and respectful in dissent, that we can build the civil discourse that constitutes a pluralistic, dynamic, and peaceful planet.

I thank colleagues, friends, and students for their support in making this book come to fruition. I have often wished to be able to talk with my doctoral advisor, Renie Bierman, who passed away during its writing. A compassionate teacher, she was a cornerstone for my critical thought. I also write in memory of my late father, Stanford J. Shaw, for being a model of diligent research and writing, and also simply for being a kind

⁴ Asani, 2018: xiv.

and loving person. I also thank my mother, Ayşe Ezel Kural Shaw, for combining erudition, passion, and love of teaching while raising me to take my intellectual independence and authority as a woman as a matter of course. I would like to thank the support of my mentor–colleague–friends Ayşe Batur, Zeynep Çelik, Victoria Holbrook, Ruth Mas, Gülru Necipoğlu, Raphaëlle Praesinger, Nasser Rabbat, Nadim Sarrouh, and Margaret Shortle. I am grateful to Birgit Krawetz, Birgit Meyer, Stephennie Mulder, and Terje Stordelen for their thoughtful commentary on earlier drafts and chapters of this work, to Sarah Cresap Johnson for her assistance with the last stages of the manuscript, and my editors Maria Marsh, Ruth Boyes, Mary Starkey, and Atifa Jiwa at Cambridge University Press for their thoughtful, constructive, and diligent support. Finally, I thank the light of my heart, my daughter Z.E.A., who showed patience beyond her years in giving me time to work instead of joining her in play. Her love, curiosity, and expressions of pride in her mother have energized and inspired me.

Note on Transcultural Communication

This book uses simple Latin script transliterations of names and words originally written in Arabic script in Arabic, Persian, Ottoman Turkish, or Urdu. The philological legacy informing much of Islamic studies has normalized transliteration using extensive diacritical marks specific to standardized renditions of each language. Such standardized transliterations cannot capture the diversity of pronunciation in diverse times, regions, and dialects. While useful for language learners, diacritics can be off-putting for a non-specialist reader. By avoiding diacritics and transliterating into common English, this book does not aim to guide accurate pronunciation so much as to familiarize the unfamiliar in what is, for better or worse, the lingua franca of our era.

Since modern Turkish uses Latin script, I have included its modified lettering in proper names: ş = sh; ç = ch; c = g as in “gym”; ı = i as in “girl”; ğ is silent, eliding flanking vowels.

I have also included (where necessary) the use of ‘ in proper names and terms, indicating a glottal stop, which can be approximated by stopping rather than eliding successive letters. Thus Sa’di is not read “saadi” but Sa di, with a brief pause in the middle. In full transcription, different apostrophes indicate different letters, but this convention is complex for the reader not versed in Arabic and is not followed in this text.

The letters v and w are indicated by the same letter in Arabic script but pronounced differently in different languages. Where Persian/Turkish is the dominant use, I have used “v”; when the word stems from Arabic, I have used “w.”

Many Arabic and Persian words are included in parenthesis to facilitate further investigation of concepts and histories mentioned without extensive analysis in this study.

Similarly enhancing accessibility, dates are not cited through the Islamic (*hijri*) calendar, but through that of the Common Era (CE). All dates are CE, unless indicated as BCE (Before Common Era).

European-style surnames have only become widespread in the regions discussed in this book during the last century. Thus reference by last name, and indexing, is often misleading. To take honorifics or place names as

though they were last names does not fit many cultural norms. To simplify name references, I have not found a satisfying alternative to following established conventions for referring to people in English, but hereby note this as misleading.

For example, in Arabic, people were often described by their given names, modified by the name of the father, son, or daughter, as well as honorifics of allegiance expressed as servitude. Thus the name Abu al-Qasim Muhammad ibn Abdallah ibn ‘Abd al-Muttalib ibn Hashim ibn ‘Abd Manaf al-Quraishi means Muhammad, father of al-Qasim, son of Abdallah, son of servant-of-al-Muttalib son of Hashim son of servant-of-Manaf of the Quraish tribe. That’s a bit long, so this book refers to him as the Prophet Muhammad.

There are no capital letters in Arabic script, so I have used lower case to indicate auxiliary words (the and son of) next to main names (e.g. ibn Arabi), except when capitalization is required by English punctuation.

In Persian, a proper name is often followed by an identifying location. Thus Jalal al-Din Rumi means Splendor of the Faith, of Rum (Anatolia). Thus calling him “Rumi,” as is common in the West, only indicates where he was from and is not his name. Most followers call him by the patronymic “Mevlana” (our master). Sometimes, however, an epithet does become shortened to a single word. Thus one can safely call Farid al-Din Attar (savior of the faith, perfumer) simply as Attar.

Honorifics such as *Ağa* (Ottoman), *Agha* (Persian), and *Khan* more or less mean “sir.” They are often associated with proper names, but should not be mistaken for surnames except when used as such in the modern era. Similar honorifics in this book include *Amir* (Leader), *Qadi* (Judge), *Shah* (King) and *Sultan* (King).

Early Islamic scholars who gained fame according to Latinized names, like Ibn al-Haytham, known as Alhazen, are referred to in the original variant unless discussed in a European context.

Published translations are gratefully acknowledged in the reference section. Translations from works in French, German, and Turkish are mine. I have chosen to feature literature that is available in Western languages, but often insufficiently analyzed in the plurality of its meanings. The corpus of historical literature that has not been translated, republished in the past century, or critically discussed in any language is vast, leaving us moderns with imperfect access to the thought-worlds of the past.

Spellings quoted from other texts have been left as in the original.

Recognizing that this book will be read by people of multiple intellectual, linguistic, and faith cultures, I have done my best to introduce figures,

dates, and define terms the first time that they occur. Thus terms relating to the history of religion and to critical methodology are generally defined in the earlier portions of the text. When sections are read independently, readers should refer to these definitions.

For ease of viewing, extraneous elements of manuscript pages have been cropped in image reproductions accompanying this text.

Introduction | From Islamic Art to Perceptual Culture

Early one summer evening in Istanbul over a decade ago, as the evening darkness filtered through an electric blue sky, I was walking down a hill toward the Bosphorus. I looked up and saw a dome above me, as though in a mosque. The pattern quickly resolved into the overlapping branches and delicate leaves of an acacia tree. It then shifted back into a dome, and back again into a tree. I realized: pattern is not abstraction, but representation. The difference comes from me. My imaginary image of ‘a tree’, seen in profile from a distance, did not match my experience of treeness, looking up, bewildered by the dancing geometries of lights between its shades. There is nothing more realistic about the picture of a tree seen from far away than the geometry in a tiled dome. They represent the same object. Differently.

Several years later, visiting my other former home, I took my four-year-old daughter to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. I happily described the serenity of the Buddha and Shiva Nataraja’s dance of creation and destruction. I thought she might find the medieval European section boring, so I ushered her through.

She stopped in the middle of the gallery. “Mommy . . .” she asked, “why are there so many naked men with their arms out?”

I laughed: the sheer impossibility of thinking *that*. “Sweetheart, that’s not such a good story for children,” I said. Not wanting her to conclude that so many people we know, followers of the largest religion in the world, believe the rather peculiar story of a violent God killing his own son, I kept silent. I immediately realized that my answer was bizarre. Of course, it is a *perfectly fine* story for children. For centuries, Christian children everywhere have learned the story of the Crucifixion with no greater trauma than all the other children learning about all the other violent deities.

I imagined looking at these paintings without already knowing what they mean. The Crucifixion is so inextricable from hegemonic Western cultures that the body of Christ depicted on the cross instantly metamorphoses into a symbol. We are incapable of seeing the (near)-naked-man-with-his-arms-stretched-out that my daughter saw. Repeatedly witnessing

the Crucifixion, we unconsciously reinforce our participation in an established cultural frame – whether or not we profess Christian faith.

In contrast, when we enter an exhibit of art from a less familiar culture, our gaze remains as naïve as that of a child. We look at the world through the filter of what we know. This not only risks misrepresenting the unfamiliar, it also prevents us from stretching our own horizons by encountering something new. Instead of opening ourselves to growing through the incorporation of difference, we force difference into the straitjacket of our imagination.

This limitation emerges through a double translation intrinsic to art history: first, that of European premodern cultures into modern frameworks; and secondly, that of other cultures through the resulting Euronormative category called art. The past, along with the other, becomes the blind spot of art history. What would it all look like if we were to position ourselves at one of these blind spots and apprehend the world through an alternative code?

This book explores this possibility from one such vantage point, that of Islam. It conceives of Islam not through the modern distinction between religion and culture, but as a self-referential interplay of interwoven discourses, rituals, and beliefs moving across space and time. It proposes that:

Islamic art emerges not from production, but from reception.
 Islam abides not in the object, but in the subject.
 Yet the subject of this Islam need not be Muslim.
 And the object can be material or imaginary; visual, sonic, or verbal.
 Its analytical frame need not be limited by either art or history.
 Transcending this frame, it can talk back to Western art history.
 In doing so, it dislocates disciplinary premises of center and periphery.

This book comes to these propositions by analyzing discussions of perception in texts that have circulated widely across regions of Islamic hegemony, more casually called the ‘Islamic world.’ These include the Quran, the foundational text of Islam believed by Muslims to transcribe the divine word, and the *Hadith*, the record of the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad. The interpretation of these texts grounds the dialogical practice known as Islamic law (*Sharia*). Yet Islam exceeds legal discourses. It emerges as well through the interaction of interpretive and philosophical texts elaborating faith engaging with multiple previous, neighboring, and intertwined cultures, and disseminated through ritual, poetry, music, geometry, and painting. The ideas about perception woven through them suggest that the questions that we ask through frameworks of religion, art, and history often veil Islamic culture in the name of revealing it. This not only alters dominant understandings of

Islam and its arts, but also destabilizes some premises of disciplinary art history that claim global methodological utility.

0.1 Can Art Be Islamic?

The noblest rescript with which the scribes of the workshop of prayer adorn the album of composition and novelty, and the most subtle picture with which the depicitors of the gallery of intrinsic meaning decorate the assemblies of creativity and invention, is praise of the Creator, by whose pen are scriven sublime letters and exalted forms. In accordance with the dictum, “The pen dried up with what would be until Doomsday,” the coalesced forms and dispersed shapes of the archetypes were hidden in the recesses of the unseen in accordance with the dictum, “I was a hidden treasure.”

Then, in accordance with the words, “I wanted to be known, so I created creation in order to be known,” he snatched with the fingers of destiny the veil of non-existence from the countenance of being, and with the hand of mercy and the pen, which was “the first thing God created.” He painted [them] masterfully on the canvas of being.¹

Penned in 1544 by the manuscript painter Dust Muhammad (d. 1564), these paragraphs initiate the preface to an album of calligraphy and painting prepared under the powerful cultural patron, the Safavid prince Bahram Mirza (1517–1549). Dust Muhammad was in a unique position to record the discourses surrounding this endeavor. Trained in the studio of the illustrious manuscript painter Kamal ul-Din Behzad (c.1450–1535), who honed his creative powers at the court of the Timurid sultan Husayn Bayqara (r. 1469–1506), Dust Muhammad worked under the patronage of the Safavid shah Tahmasp (r. 1524–1576) and later under the Mughal emperor Humayun (r. 1530–1540; 1555–1556). The album later entered the imperial library of the Ottoman dynasty (1398–1923) in Constantinople, underscoring the longevity of its value.

This preface ensconces a genealogy of calligraphers and painters among stories articulating the human creative impulse in relationship with the divine. It frames human creativity as part of the workshop of prayer that adorns all of creation, referred to as the album of composition. Human creativity praises God through devotional emulation. The contents of the album reveal the intrinsic meaning of the world by articulating the creative force in which we partake, a divinity within and without us. Listing

¹ Thackston, 2000: 4.

generations of creators, Dust Muhammad considers how people learned, but not what they produced; how their personal excellence translated into great works, but not what constituted the greatness of their works.

What, exactly, is such a text? Such prefaces have provided extraordinary sources for more detailed understandings of Persian painting in the field of Islamic art history since their rediscovery, translation, and analysis since the mid-twentieth century.² Yet to read these sources only through a disciplinary framework limits their broader implications for our apprehension of the historical cultures of Islam. The spiritual framing of an album of exquisite human reflections on God's creation – calligraphic and painted panels that we moderns categorize as art – was not merely the thought of a single individual. The preface celebrates a cultural attitude shared by artists and patrons penned by an artist whose work engaged with four major Islamic dynasties. Although it cannot represent an imaginary, homogeneous Islam, it reflects an attitude articulated in numerous ways, in many languages, in many formats – poetic and prose, theological and popular – that persisted from the ninth into the twentieth century. Such a text informs, but does not fit within, the frame of art history, a modern disciplinary tool for the apprehension of special things.

This text is one of many sources this book explores in order to discover that which is not art history: an attitude pervasive in the historical Islamic world (but neither unique to nor universal within it), propagated through its discourses, and all too often erased through the imposition of modern ways of thinking and knowing about the past. Not mandated by scripture, this attitude informed texts reflecting both theological and worldly concerns. For its participants, such an attitude must have felt natural. It was never expressed as a theory of art, because 'art' was not a concept intrinsic to it. Engaging creativity in relation to the divine, this attitude enabled and justified the essence of what it means to be human. Dust Muhammad articulates this by quoting a poem:

When a man is ignorant in his being, he cannot
 be called human simply because of his form.
 O God, I am that handful of dust that previously
 was void of my form and conduct.
 Since you gave me human form first, make me
 share intrinsically in humanity.³

² Minorsky, 1959; Roxburgh, 2001: 135–6; Akın-Kıvanç, 2011. ³ Thackston, 2000: 5.

This understanding of the dependence of human creativity on the divine, the glory of the world and its material traps, meanders through Islamic discourses. This book weaves a theory from these paths: a theory of perception engaging with but not bound by art or history; a theory of Islam between theology and culture. A theory of an attitude that once was so natural that the need to describe it emerges only from an external space requiring translation. What we conceive as ‘art’ plays one part in this broader framework.

Art history rarely addresses this attitude, because its methods rarely engage with Islam. Investigating the worldly interests of beautiful objects, it leaves religion to the theologians. But is such a distinction between the godly and the worldly useful in historical cultures? The secularist thesis underlying art history – that culture exists separate from faith – limits our awareness of an attitude, such as that exemplified above, different from our own. Art history can match objects with makers, reconstruct unknown pasts, illustrate networks of success and achievement, set the boundaries between commonality and distinction, and trace paths of communication. It maps a system of value across a system of time. Yet framing the unfamiliar through categories that seem natural to our modern environments cannot bridge the gap of alterity. To engage with culture, we have to leave many of our premises outside the analytical door, and let the speech of the unknown build its own house within our universe.

The absence of religion from art history pertains not only to Islamic art, but to the genesis of its modern methods during an era of secularization. While the discipline has multiple origins, its modern theorization emerges in mid-eighteenth-century Europe within broader discourses of rationalism and secularization, the rise of capitalism, the shift from aristocratic to republican government, and a growing consciousness of the world as a space of resources and conquest. The modern concept of ‘art’ reflects an expansion in the function of painting and sculpture from the conveyance of meaning, often related to worship, to one signaling broader forces, whether those of history, identity, or the market.⁴ The emergence of ‘aesthetics’ as a measure of ‘art’ reflects a presumptive distinction between intellectual and sensory knowledge through modern European terminologies. The hierarchy that modern subjects establish between the cognitive order of logic and the lower sensory order of aesthetics solidified in *Aesthetica* (1750) by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762). This informed the influential *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790) by

⁴ Shiner, 2001.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), which describes the proper observer as necessarily distanced and disinterested. This enables him to generalize his taste and behave *as if* his position is universal, precluding the potential naturalness of any other attitude.

This position of disinterest enabled the new institution of the museum to streamline mass engagements with art. The proliferation of museums in the nineteenth century altered art in its relationships with the public, class, and identity.⁵ While some understood museums as enabling a revolutionary redistribution of symbolic wealth from elites to the nascent nation, others perceived a violent erasure of living culture in the name of preservation.⁶ The museum gave each object a proper place in relation to other objects, and gave each viewer a proper relationship with objects and with each other. Sensory experience of objects became reduced to sight, as display required smell, taste, touch, and sound to recede into the viewer's imagination.

The philosophy of Gottfried Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) enshrined the shift in the modern apprehension of objects from sensory perception to intellectual cognition. The intrinsic meaning of the object retreated as it became a sign of pure Spirit, traversing time and civilizations. For Hegel, the loss of localized meaning in art functioned as a laudable indication of teleological progress from the material expression of religion to rationalist self-awareness idealized through the French Revolution.⁷ He described this distinction as a cornerstone of modernity, in which reflection on art, rather than art itself, conferred meaning.

The peculiar manner of the production of art and its works no longer completely fill our highest need; we have progressed too far to still be able to venerate and pray to works of art; the impression they make on us is of a more reflective kind, and what they arouse in us still requires a higher touchstone and has to prove itself in a different manner. Thought and reflection have overtaken the fine arts.⁸

For Hegel, the shift from worship to analysis, or practice to theory, signified progress from body to mind. The modern preference for measurable information about objects over discussion of their communicative capacity reflects the hierarchy of rationalism over sensation underpinning disciplinary art history. The expectation of progress frames styles, artists, and/or cultures as developing progressively one from the next, as if artists are more interested in sublating precedents than in engaging with multiple contexts in the present tense. Although subsequent art-historical empiricism often

⁵ Gilks, 2012. ⁶ Maleuvre, 2001: 2, 13. ⁷ Dale, 2014: 200–201; Vilchez, 2017: 2.

⁸ Harries, 1974: 689.

distances itself from Hegelianism, the discipline's maintenance of the object as a metonym for collective culture, its dependence on periodization and distinct civilizations, and its engagement with art on a reified historical trajectory reflects the persistence of underlying Hegelian premises.⁹

The modern idea of art displaced objects from a religious system of meaning to a secular one. Instead of functioning within a holistic, multimedia, multisensory environment, objects became paradigmatic of broader narratives, often geared toward the collective identity of the nation-state and a hierarchy of civilizations. Sequentialized, objects could serve as teleological visual markers of progress. Framed as history rather than inheritance, the art object signaled two contradictory frameworks: collective identity and a disjunction from modernity.

Yet secular vocabularies of art often obscure premises inherited from the hegemony of Western European Christianity. Just because one removes words such as 'Christian' or 'God' from the discussion of art does not mean that the naturalized habits established through the religious contexts with which art was long associated suddenly disappear. Instead, they permeate our secular discourse of art. Consider, for example, how images of Christ engage with a viewer. For an Eastern Orthodox Christian, a representation of Christ Pantocrator functions through its investment with divine presence. The painting brings the divine into communication with the believer; the divine looks at us. In contrast, for a post-Renaissance Western European Christian, an image of the Crucifixion enables the viewer to witness the divine. Whereas the former icon embodies presence, the latter uses conventions of realism, such as perspective, foreshortening, and shading to represent a presence that is elsewhere – it makes the absent deceptively present. Both of these representational systems function in religious contexts. Yet only the second set of conventions of representational naturalism persist as norms in hegemonic, secular art history. This is hardly surprising, as art history developed in Western Europe, where norms established under Western European Christianity feel entirely natural – so natural, in fact, that they seem universal. This naturalization has enabled a vocabulary of the image specific to the history of Western European Christianity to become normative for understanding all sorts of images, erasing the conceptual histories underlying the aesthetic practices of other cultures, whether Orthodox Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, or anything else. The universalization of a local experience only reinforces a parochialism always already blind to the possibility of difference. Religion

⁹ Elkins, 1988; Gaiger, 2011.

becomes defined as a set of precepts or beliefs to which one rationally adheres, ignoring how religion functions as well as a mode of being-in-the-world informed by faith.

Similarly, much as objects designed for purposes of worship eschew religion to enter a discourse of art, the rituals of respect encountered in the museum – silence, circumambulation, and meditation – perpetuate a sacral aura in the episteme of knowledge rather than faith.¹⁰ The preference for sight obviates touch, speech, song, anointing, feeding, carrying, or any other engagement with the object. Art gains secular sacrality through its disembodiment from the subject.¹¹ Reflecting on the treatment of Raphael's Sistine Madonna as artwork rather than altarpiece, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) theorized the conflation of modernity with Christianity as the *Entgötterung* ('de-godization' or 'removal of the gods').

This expression does not mean the mere doing away with the gods, gross atheism. The loss of the gods is a twofold process. On the one hand, the world picture is Christianized in as much as the cause of the world is posited as infinite, unconditional, absolute. On the other hand, Christendom transforms Christian doctrine into a worldview (the Christian world view), and in that way makes itself up to date.¹²

This universalization of (Western European) Christian values became normative under the aegis of secularization precisely as Europe became a global hegemonic power, reinscribing the Christian as 'Western', and transforming missionary zeal into modernization through Westernization.¹³

The repurposing of altarpieces as art helped translate the rhetorical frame of Christian visual culture into the secular discourse of art history. The valorization of the representational image establishes a normative relationship between the viewer on one side of the image and reality that is always necessarily elsewhere. Representational meaning becomes equated with semiotic interpretation, such that elements in an image constitute textual signs. Signifying potential reinforces a hierarchy of 'art' over 'craft.' The artist gains status as the inspired, ingenious mediator of culture, decoded through the seemingly objective mediation of a distanced critic anointed with special access to truth.

The shift in emphasis from artistic genius to objects as cultural signifiers took place through the work of Alois Riegl (1858–1905). Literalizing the Hegelian paradigm of the 'Spirit' of 'civilization' progressing Westward, his

¹⁰ Duncan, 1995. ¹¹ Gualdrini, 2013. ¹² Heidegger, 1977: 116–117.

¹³ Makdisi, 1997; Mas, 2015.

thought liberated form from context. Objects thus became independent markers of history. In contrast to earlier pattern books essentializing regional practices through static stylistic taxonomy, such as the *Grammar of Ornament* (1856) by Owen Jones (1809–1874), Riegl examined diachronic stylistic change to trace the development, interaction, and decline of cultures through a Hegelian dialectic. Focusing on establishing complete sequences of objects, he eschewed the association of works with contemporary texts. Rather, he suggested that a complete sequence could exceed the analysis of any single example to function as a measurable, scientific record of how a people produce the world through their will-to-art (*Kunstwollen*), representing their collective apprehension of the world (*Weltanschauung*). Disassociating form from function or context, his method required a holistic understanding of cultures. Emphasizing trans-temporal and trans-geographic imperialism over nationalism, his 1893 work *Stilfragen* (Questions of Style) recognized Islamic ornament as a central link in his quest to establish a linear trajectory of art from ancient Egypt to modern Europe. As the idea of *Kunstwollen* developed in the early to mid-twentieth century, it became a means of apprehending a people's collective psychology – a means of determining the internal structuring principles of individual artists as externalized artistic expressions of culture.¹⁴

After World War II, the 'Western' art-historical tradition came to include pre-Christian traditions mapped onto a hermetically sealed, teleological Hegelian historiography in which the 'Spirit' of civilization moved ever Westward – Mesopotamia, Egypt, and ancient Greece – rendering everybody else external to history.¹⁵ The 'Western' expanded from the Christian paradigm to the 'Judeo-Christian', a nineteenth-century term justifying racialized Protestant supremacy in Europe recycled in anti-fascist discourse of late 1930s North America to assimilate Jews into 'Western' societies.¹⁶ Yet when we discuss the 'Western' artistic tradition, the Jewish is as absent as the Islamic – indeed, a common yet inaccurate presumption asserts that the second commandment precludes the existence of Jewish art.¹⁷ Through this enforced absence, the category 'Western' seamlessly secularizes the history of art in the Western European Christian tradition as a cultural norm.

This elision reflects the incorporation of religious prejudice into Enlightenment thought. In the Middle Ages, Judaism was regularly

¹⁴ Elsner, 2006: 761. ¹⁵ Nelson, 1997.

¹⁶ Silk, 1984: 66; Nathan and Topolski, 2016; Brodtkin, 1998. ¹⁷ Bland, 2000.

personified as Synagoga, symbolized as a woman blindfolded to signify the dogmatic adherence to scripture attributed to the Jewish inability to see the light of Christianity. Although distancing himself from religion, Kant perpetuated this attribution of dogmatism to Judaism as underlying the absence of the image: the sublimity of Jewish reason undermined the distancing mechanism of the image to achieve objectivity.¹⁸ Thus the image prohibition exceeds an aesthetic or even cultural critique of the Abrahamic other, instead circumscribing Jewish engagement in reasoned thought. Representational art stands for the possibility of being fully human. Such denunciations of Judaism have since been transferred to Islam, accused of an ‘image prohibition’ – even in an era when realism is not the primary measure of art, and even though images proliferate in Islamic cultures. Like Judaism, Islam stands accused not simply of lacking pictures, but of associated nefarious qualities: an absence of reason, antiquated beliefs, and the subjugation of women through their supposed ‘invisibility’ under the veil. A predilection for violence against images, such as the destruction of the Bamyān Buddhas or statues at the Mosul Museum, has become metonymic for supposed Islamic hostility toward civilization itself.¹⁹

Through these processes, what we call ‘Western art’ is ‘European Christian art’ by a new name. This category includes all sensory objects following regimens of representation foregrounding the naturalistic image that developed under the cultural aegis of European Christianity. It includes all art that conceptually responds to the Western artistic tradition, even when it does not bear any overt connection to religion and including the era of modernism, which innovates in breaking against these implicitly Christian traditions that we call Western. It does not have to be religious; it simply engages with or against norms established under a religious episteme.

Art history has developed its paradigms through the analysis of Western art that might be better termed Christianate, underscoring the modern transposition of premises informed by European Christianity as culture which permeate secular Western societies and which often serve as a measure for the assimilation of those designated as other.²⁰ Generously

¹⁸ Mack, 2013: 153. ¹⁹ Shaw, 2015.

²⁰ This neologism draws on Marshall Hodgson’s much-debated term “Islamicate,” proposed through the posthumous 1974 publication of *The Venture of Islam*, to distinguish cultural artifacts and practices shared by multiple religious persuasions from properly religious, ‘Islamic’ ones. For a discussion of the problems of this terminology, see Ahmed, 2015: 157, 444–450.

globalizing these paradigms, it has recognized the art of other cultures to the extent that it suits this filter. When applied outside Europe, the term 'art' represents a form of epistemic violence through the renegotiation of objects from the intrinsic logic of their cultural-social life into an extrinsic realm of analysis and modern commodification in private collections and museums. It denigrates the cultures in which works were produced as intellectually mute and lesser than the narratively produced, imaginary collective designated as 'our (Christianate) own'. Perpetuating these assumptions, every exhibit of non-Western or premodern art that does not explicitly explain the concepts informing the works limits them to communicate in terms we bring to their apprehension. As a result, Islamic art history has often designated a history of objects produced under Islamic hegemony and considered through lenses crafted to define the 'Western' legacy: art, aesthetics, and dynasties. This is a history of objects recognized as art and understood in analytical terms from a vantage point dependent on European intellectual history. This art history has never been Islamic.

0.2 From Islamic Art to a Decolonized Art History

If the capacity of Islamic art history is structurally limited in its ability to reflect Islam outside terms deeply embedded in Western experience, then what functions does it serve? The incorporation of non-Western cultures in a globalized art history has long served a multitude of contradictory functions for which it is not only ill equipped, but many of which no longer address contemporary sociopolitical realities. In the Cold War era, Islamic art history served a dual function: to push Islam into a traditional past associated with the national heritage of Middle Eastern nation-states rooting their modernity in secularism; and as an institutionalized marker of civilizational hierarchies structuring the post-colonial order. Today, the sociopolitical environment has changed. Secularism no longer holds pride of place in the modern politics of many nation-states, and many Middle Eastern states have embraced Islam not as heritage in a distant past, but as a governing principle or nationalist cause. If Islamic art history provided a modern, secular narrative for Middle Eastern nation-states that no longer espouse secular values, then for whom do we develop art-historical narratives?

Perhaps it represents the rise of contemporary Islam. Yet the Islam of today is not the same as that in which the objects of Islamic art were experienced. The violence of modernism and colonialism has altered it.

The simultaneous dispersal of modern bureaucratic, educational, and epistemic systems under both direct colonialism and voluntary Westernization irrevocably altered intellectual life in regions of Islamic hegemony. By the late nineteenth century, influential Islamic thinkers were educated (at least partly) in European-style schools and adopted supposedly universal Western epistemic practices. Living networks of Islam ossified under the label of tradition. As legal systems secularized, historical educational and juridical systems lost longstanding leadership practices. Islamic thinkers adopted European understandings of Islam as distinct from the newly invented category of ‘the West’.²¹ Modern Islam often developed as an oppositional ideology to colonialism, which perpetuated the violence of the modern already normalized in Europe as part of teleological, unstoppable progress. Although often denigrated as ‘medieval,’ contemporary Islam depends on and exemplifies the historical arc of modernity.²²

This violence included Max Weber’s modernist assertion of the secular as a ‘disenchanted,’ natural space of social action, distinguishing this-worldliness and physical reality from the imaginary and irrational space designated for religion.²³ The alternative is not to return to an ‘enchanted’ religious order, but to recognize secularism as an ideology productive and restrictive of meaning in its own right. Just as Marx perceived a need in his own time for history and philosophy to unmask the other-world of truth indicated in religion, now it is time for the this-world of truth claimed by secularism, the *de facto* religion of high modernity, to be in turn unmasked. A bit more enchantment may not hurt either.

A decolonizing art history must rely on a ‘disenchanted’ dose of facticity – the citation of sources within a framework of reasoned argument – while simultaneously respecting ways of knowing that may not fit modern epistemic boundaries. Such an art history cannot be a-colonial – it is necessarily informed by and participant in the legacies of coloniality. It recognizes that there is no neutral zone from which to take a safe distance and observe; all positions are invested in a history and a set of interests, and thereby political. It also cannot be static: it must retain its mobility between epistemes. Michel Foucault (1926–1984) defines an episteme as experienced in retrospect:

the strategic apparatus which permits of separating out from among all the statements which are possible those that will be acceptable within, I won’t say a scientific

²¹ Abou El Fadl, 2009. ²² Gray, 2003. ²³ Asad, 2003; Lyons, 2014.

theory, but a field of scientificity, and which it is possible to say are true or false. The episteme is the 'apparatus' which makes possible the separation, not of the true from the false, but of what may from what may not be characterised as scientific.²⁴

The secular episteme, like the colonial or Islamic epistemes, is recognizable largely because our world no longer fully inhabits it, and therefore no longer normalizes its hegemonic power.

Instead of engaging in such decolonization, however, dominant exhibitionary practices often still justify relevance through the desire to undermine prejudice. Such cultural ambassadorship was promoted in the framework of Cold War politics in a 1951 speech by the eminent German-American Islamic art historian Richard Ettinghausen (1906–1979):

Muslim art can also have a special significance for the Muslim world of today. Since this is its one cultural achievement widely accepted and admired by the West, a rededication to it can compensate the East to a certain degree for its scientific and technological retardation, something which neither the oil fields nor strategic location can achieve. Be that as it may, there has been and still is no better ambassador of good will than art.²⁵

The expectation that art history serve as a cultural ambassador reflects a desire for integrative assimilation for both the discipline and the region. An Islamic art history that participates in the broader discipline of art history through methods such as iconographic analysis and historical periodization proves itself on a par with dominant narratives of the West. Similarly, the nationalist, secularist, and Westernizing ideologies governing many mid-twentieth-century Middle Eastern countries emphasized modernist assimilation into a global order of nations through a universal paradigm of empiricism. Today, when this universalism has exposed its weak foundations, both theoretically in post-colonial studies and in the fracturing of the seemingly stable political world order of the nation-state, the integrative aims of an earlier era of art history seem almost nostalgic, as if enough art history will prove that the other was never particularly foreign after all.

Although contemporary art historians have often resisted this expectation, it remains implicit in contemporary justifications for Islamic art exhibitions. Following the attack on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001, numerous exhibitions and galleries devoted to historical and modern Islamic art have aimed to provide a positive message about a much-maligned religion that is also the second largest in the world.²⁶ For

²⁴ Foucault, 1980: 197. ²⁵ Ettinghausen, 1951: 47. ²⁶ Shaw, 2019.

example, the 2011 reconstruction of the Islamic galleries at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, secularized and regionalized under the new name Galleries of the Arts of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia, presumably aimed to rectify the reductive perception that Islam is only about religion, and never about culture. Yet every revised system of categorization instills new erasures. While addressing the exclusion of religious minorities implicit in the term 'Islamic,' the new name perpetuates the historical oppression of linguistic and ethnic minorities, such as the Amazigh, Balochi, Kurdish, and Palestinian peoples, who do not have nation-states and who have participated in Islamic perceptual culture (understood in cross-religious frameworks). The problem may not be the categories so much as the fixed taxonomies implicit in the practice of categorization.

Even in its attempt to reframe objects through geography rather than religion, the new name may have backfired. In a review entitled "A Cosmopolitan Trove of Exotic Beauty," Holland Cotter of the *New York Times* explained: "Art has always reflected what's wrong about people as much as what's right about them. In image after image, beauty is countered by cruelty; utopianism by power grabs. Paradise gardens and battlefields make equally desirable real estate."²⁷ Similarly, according to Peter Schjedhal of the *New Yorker*: "The Islamic Wing affords adventures in difference. It made me acutely conscious of myself as European-American – a latter-day scion of the Renaissance wedding of Greek and Roman with Judeo-Christian traditions. It did this by reversing my sense of Islam as a topic of study: rather abruptly, Islam seemed to be scrutinizing me."²⁸ Having seen the exhibit, both reviewers emphasize the impenetrability of what they see, relying on hackneyed tropes of the Orient and violence unrelated to the display. This sense of the exotic emerges from the entitlement that comes from expecting the categories that we know to explain all experience. Failing to master what he sees, Schjedhal summons all the might of Western civilization to reaffirm his identity. Inexplicably, he feels watched, perhaps even menaced, by the agency implied in the indifference of Islamic art to his categories.

If even such refined exhibitions of Islamic art fail in representing culture beyond the limited expectations of sophisticated viewers, clearly another paradigm needs to emerge as an alternative to one demanding speech from objects and intuition from viewers. When we fail to provide substantive overviews, the avoidance of scholarly generalization

²⁷ Cotter, 2011. ²⁸ Schjedhal, 2011.

inadvertently perpetuates rather than disavows the persistent and troublesome generalizations made by others. Such reviews suggest that the presentation of art as a metonym for culture at large fails when supplemented only by history. Viewers need a lexicon of intrinsic meanings through which to engage with, and not simply observe, worlds illegible to the modern viewer.

This book pursues a tactical alternative to integration, suggesting that it is perfectly acceptable – perhaps even liberating – to be foreign and heterogeneous. Or rather, it may ultimately be less alienating to enable an apparent foreignness to undermine the norms that we take for granted than to hold onto those norms even when the hegemonic powers they uphold, such as the secularism of the nation-state, erode. Art cannot be Islamic if the idea of art, and all the concepts associated with it, emerge from a framework that excludes Islam.

But what is Islam? It would be futile to claim to represent an authentic Islamic voice in contrast to a colonial one, pitting one modern essentialism against another. Rather, this book aims to dethrone the modern legitimization of certain types of knowledge governing these definitions. Excavating past texts, it unearths traces of an episteme distinct from that of modernity. Historical Islam is informed by and informs the episteme explored in this book, but their limits are not congruent. Each exceeds the other. Informed by numerous interacting discourses, the episteme exceeds the boundaries of any particular faith. Diverse in its interpretations and ultimately reframed through modernity, Islam likewise exceeds the episteme. Rather than describing an Islamic essence, the episteme explored in this book offers a window to the premodern. In doing so, it critiques modern empiricism as the most reliable paradigm of knowledge as applied to any extra-modern framework, including the pasts the West has appropriated as its own. Regardless of nation, gender, or creed, we are all moderns now.²⁹

0.3 The Paradox of Islamic Art

The need to fashion an ‘Islamic’ art history emerges against the backdrop of a longstanding discomfort with the field’s name, frequently expressed by its practitioners. Regardless of how much it develops new arenas of investigation, the overview remains uneasy, and often avoided, in favor of in-depth studies. As Jas Elsner points out, without a governing narrative even the most accurate specialist studies can fall into a methodological fallacy in

²⁹ Akkach, 2005a: xxiii.

which material evidence leaps from precise analysis to broad cultural representations, which ultimately become woven into a narrative governed by preconceived stories external to any evidence.³⁰

In the absence of a new framework, the old one persists. Rooted in the narrative structure of rise and fall, an overview of 'Islamic art history' implies authentic origins for (Arab) Islam, the corruption of which (by Persians and Turks) enables imperial greatness, coded as 'classical.' This cultural apogee devolves through contact with the West, leading to the longstanding exclusion of eclectic nineteenth- and twentieth-century Islamic arts from the art-historical canons. The erasure of this complex period of multi-directional cultural appropriation makes the twentieth-century dissolution of 'Islamic art' in the universalist modernism accompanying the redemptive rise of European colonialism seemingly inevitable. Through it all, Islamic art historians have often commented on how the field fails in relation to the predetermined category of art, and often note that the category of Islam has little religious meaning when applied to art.³¹ Nonetheless, the category of 'Islam' persists.

The contradictions of the category emerged from the moment Islam was wed to art history. One of the earliest comprehensive books using 'Islam' as a trans-temporal and trans-regional category describing art, the Orientalist Thomas Arnold's 1928 *Painting in Islam* popularized a supposed contradiction at the heart of Islamic art: that all images contravened a presumed interdiction of the image. In a review of the work, his colleague J. V. S. Wilkinson, an early specialist in Mughal painting, concurred, explaining:

Muhammadan painting is not really Muhammadan at all, or hardly at all. That is to say, it was, from the first, almost exclusively secular, and such religious art as there was "came into existence in spite of the condemnation of the teachers of the faith, and represents rather a spirit of artistic self-expression that refused to be repressed than a normal outcome of the religious life of Islam."³²

The comment presumes an Islamic doctrinal ideal isolated from the lived history of Islam, and valorizes norms associated with Western art – images and artistic individuals – not necessarily central in other cultural formations.

Such suspicion of insufficiency reappears surprisingly frequently. In 1976, Oleg Grabar (1929–2011) asked: "Can one appropriately talk of 'works of art' when dozens, if not hundreds of similar objects are involved? ... The

³⁰ Elsner, 2006. ³¹ Shaw, 2012. ³² Wilkinson, 1929: 404.

predominance of industrial arts over single works of art, the apparent requirement of a physical context, the practical usefulness of almost all objects, suggest that anthropological rather than art-historical methods are more appropriate for analysis.”³³ Nearly thirty years later, Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom similarly intoned: “Much of what many historians of Islamic art normally study – inlaid metal wares, luster ceramics, enameled glass, brocaded textiles, and knotted carpets – is not the typical purview of the historian of Western art, who generally considers such handicrafts to be ‘minor’ or ‘decorative’ arts compared with the ‘nobler’ arts of architecture, painting, and sculpture.”³⁴ Shifting the concern from artistic to documentary insufficiency, Yves Porter bemoans the lack of Persian texts fitting Euronormative expectations of demonstrative prose theorizing an external analytical event – despite established studies indicating the contrary.³⁵

Literature on the arts and aesthetics – both the theory and practice of the arts and the rules of the various aesthetic movements that have taken place from antiquity to modern times – were always important in Europe, but Persian literature has never offered much on these subjects. One would expect to find some rules defining what is beautiful and harmonious, or at least some criteria by which a finished work of art may be judged. These might include the correct proportions, not only of the human body – which is certainly not a main concern in Islamic art – but also, let us say, of the page of a manuscript or the facade of a building. Was there something like the Western ‘Golden Section’ that could have been known and used by Iranian artists and applied to any medium of art, including architecture and painting? The use of a form, of course, does not guarantee knowledge of the mathematical laws that lie behind it.³⁶

Similarly, Blair and Bloom describe ornament by refuting the analyses of geometric pattern through its imprecision in comparison with Europe:

Some artistic traditions have had religious or political institutions that were able to maintain meanings and interpretations over long periods and great distances – one thinks, of course, of the papacy – but the Islamic world was not one of them. It is difficult, if not impossible, to prove that any form or motif had the same meaning in Abbasid Baghdad and Ottoman Istanbul, let alone in nineteenth-century Java, and so iconographic arguments in Islamic art often end up as tautologies.³⁷

This Eurocentric conception of meaning, as rooted in iconography and favoring the figural and the textual, limits the range of analytical sources.

³³ Grabar, 1976: 37–39. ³⁴ Blair and Bloom, 2003: 153.

³⁵ Minorsky, 1959; Tabbaa, 1985; Necipoğlu, 1995; Roxburgh, 2001; Vilchez, 2017.

³⁶ Porter, 2000: 110. ³⁷ Blair and Bloom, 2006: 26.

Contrary to Blair and Bloom's assertion that meaning depends on homogeneity, traditions function in the intersections between diverse forms. Of course Java and Baghdad are not interchangeable. Neither are ancient Athens, Helsinki, and Naples, and yet we have no trouble understanding them as part of a single 'Western' tradition.

These authors contrast the presumed deficiency of Islamic art against a paradigmatic Western narrative. Yet this narrative only emerged through modern theorizations teleologically projecting a cohesive Christian West. Relationships of subject, representation, and taste became normalized in the late eighteenth century, progress and positivism in the nineteenth, perspective in the twentieth. If the Islamic world appears to lack comparable cohesion, it is not the failure of history so much as its narration.

Islamic art history has avoided the kind of overarching narration and theorization necessary for a comparable grand narrative through recourse to increasing empiricism and avoidance of the relationship between philosophy and art.³⁸ Even as contemporary scholarship provides excitingly nuanced clarity in its scholarly engagements, no essential revision to the overview has emerged. One rationale for this void has been the risk of essentialism inherent in defining Islam and Islamic culture despite its vast temporal, geographical, and ethnic diversities. Grabar warns of a "denial of concrete scholarship which has tended to break away from the idea of an 'Islamic' art and to dwell on specific themes, countries, and periods, feeling that no generalization should come before many studies of details."³⁹ Four decades later, Islamic art historians still seem not to have amassed enough details to justify a broad cultural basis unifying Islamic arts. Gülru Necipoğlu indicates that

there is little justification for positing a typical Islamic 'mindset,' transcending time and space, that left its imprint on the modalities of the gaze. The predilection for abstraction in the pictorial arts may have responded in part to religious constraints. However, . . . this predilection was generally theorized as a matter of aesthetic preference in the early modern literature on the visual arts, where the abstractive inner gaze reigns supreme.⁴⁰

While she aims to avoid generalization by restricting discourse of the gaze to "early modern literature" rather than to 'Islam,' she does not suggest how such literature gains categorical cohesion. Warning that trans-temporal projection runs the risk of conceiving of non-Western histories as ahistorical, like Grabar she promotes specificity.⁴¹ In the face of growing

³⁸ Necipoğlu, 2015: 56 n. 35. ³⁹ Grabar, 1977: 205. ⁴⁰ Necipoğlu, 2015: 23.

⁴¹ Necipoğlu, 2015: 28.

racialization and denigration of Islam, this emphasis on specificity marks a subtly oppositional politics, yet denies the possibility of an intellectual world marked by boundaries distinct from modern frameworks: nation-states, historical linearity, and empiricism itself.⁴² Samer Akkach identifies this avoidance of essentialism, the primary ‘sin’ of contemporary Islamic art history, as resulting in the “deconstruction of the Islamic.”⁴³ He argues against this deconstruction by focusing on spatial implications of the thought of ibn Arabi. This book argues that a thinker like ibn Arabi lies within a broad range of the discourses constituting lived Islam. Informing the perceptual cultures of Islam, so-called mystical and so-called orthodox texts are often mutually dependent and indivisible. For somebody attuned to a reality beyond that of physicality, the so-called mystical is always immanent within the mundane; a practice of reception, it may or may not be the focus of any interpretive practice. It does not participate in the hierarchy of mind and body implicit in the concept of aesthetics.

Disengagement from intellectual history has often resulted in a facile celebration of universal pleasure in beauty. Blair and Bloom valorize this approach through the example of a silk textile bearing the embroidered epigraph “I exist for pleasure; Welcome! For pleasure am I; he who beholds me sees joy and well-being.”⁴⁴ For them, the “quest to find subtle and learned meanings” has caused us to overlook “their primary meaning as invitations to stop what we are doing for a moment and contemplate, think, and let our minds explore the beauties before our eyes.” They suggest that the rhyming couplet on the embroidery “would have mesmerized the viewer much as modern advertising on TV bombards us with slogans, images, and jingles.” They invite their visitors to “contemplate the joy and well-being displayed by these magnificent objects that testify to the long and vibrant cultures and rich intellectual traditions of the Islamic lands.”⁴⁵ Yet they deny the role art history could play in facilitating access to these traditions, and the role these intellectual traditions could play in articulating our understanding of the arts as well as of Islam. Art can provide a gateway to the manifold historical cultures Islam, but only if we are willing to rethink ‘art’ through the voices of those cultures. Rather than marginalizing the agency of Islam in ‘Islamic art,’ this book examines its agency as a driving force within it.

⁴² Aydin, 2017. ⁴³ Akkach, 2005a: xxii. ⁴⁴ Blair and Bloom, 2006: 27.

⁴⁵ Blair and Bloom, 2006: 27–28. David Museum, Copenhagen. Inv. no. 2/1989.

0.4 Islam, Poetry, and Perceptual Culture

This book resituates the term ‘Islamic’ in the category ‘Islamic art history’ as equivalent to the term ‘Western’ in ‘Western art history.’ ‘Islamic’ and ‘Western’ each designate categories of perceptual practice emerging through their respective discursive realms of Islamic and Christian European hegemony.⁴⁶ Like hegemonic Western (Christianate) cultures, the cultures we designate as ‘Islamic’ included complex, transcultural, trans-geographic, interfaith, and trans-temporal literary and social engagements with practices of faith that often transgressed the bounds of what we, as modern subjects, distinguish as separate religions.⁴⁷ Just as European Christianity drew on Roman antiquity and European pagan holidays through non-linear, strategic appropriations, Islam developed intertwined with a multitude of local cultures.⁴⁸ Like the Western (Christianate) world, the historical Islamic world was never static, insular, or uniform. And just as ‘Western art’ relies upon intellectual traditions reverberating through its manifold cultural transformations, the arts of the Islamic world depend on a dynamic intellectual history.

The exclusion of Islam from the ‘Judeo-Christian’ West belies intertwined geographical and intellectual interactions of Islam with both Abrahamic and antique Greek and Roman cultures generally conceived as ‘Western.’ Predominant models of the history of early Islam locate its origins in the Arabian Peninsula and witness it spreading northward and westward over the map, as though it emerged fully formed in the history of its origins. Such narratives neglect the persistence of preexisting cultures within the blossoming of Islam. As early Islamic forces conquered provincial administrations in the Roman and Sasanian Empires, they did not destroy existing practices. Muslims often directed minority governments. While many locals did convert, states also benefited from the taxes decreed in the Quran as legitimately levied on non-Muslims, financially incentivizing the maintenance of large and prosperous non-Muslim populations. As Islamic territories expanded northward across the Levant and Mesopotamia into Transoxiana and westward across Africa, Muslim rulers incorporated and learned from local populations. From the first centuries

⁴⁶ In the early twentieth century, the Indo-European roots of the Persian language led to their identification as Aryan, and thus more aesthetically refined than Arabs, designated as ‘Semitic,’ or the even less cultured Turks (Necipoğlu, 2012: 59–60).

⁴⁷ Masuzawa, 2005.

⁴⁸ This book uses ‘Roman’ instead of ‘Byzantine’, a modern term designating the Eastern Roman Empire, ruled (mostly) from Constantinople until 1453 (Ostrogorsky, 1969: 28).

of Islamic rule, local ethnic groups, non-Muslims, and recent converts enfolded knowledge from multiple sources into Islamic intellectual life. As Islamic forces gained power in the seventh and eighth centuries, late antique knowledge – already familiar within pre-Islamic Arab culture – accompanied the acquisition of former Roman and Sasanian territories.⁴⁹ While general Platonic influences have often been noted in considerations of Islamic poetry and art, the specific relationships between ancient philosophies and Islamic expression have rarely been traced. This book follows through on the well-established historical relationship between antiquity and Islam to consider how it played out in literary expression.

Before the unprecedented isolation and erasure of ethnicities and religious groups through modern nationalism, most regions of Islamic hegemony were multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, and included large non-Muslim communities. These included: Orthodox Christian Greeks and Armenians; Coptic, Maronite, Nestorian, Assyrian Syriac, and Catholic Christians; Druze, Jews, and Zoroastrians; Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists. The institutions of Islam, including law, philosophy, theology, and spiritualism, thrived through the accretion of diverse interactions. The populations of these diverse groups were fully integrated into the Islamic world, participating in and contributing to cultural discourses transcending religious boundaries – much as I, as a non-Christian living in ‘Western’ societies, comfortably participate in the hegemonic frameworks of my environments.

The dense discursive network constituting Islam that emerged through so much diversity resembles an intellectual planetary system revolving around the Quran as a beacon of divine guidance for Muslims. Yet Islamic art history has largely eschewed theoretical engagement with meaning in the Quran, treating it either within the category of book arts or as an epigraphic source. Particularly with architectural epigraphy, politics is presumed to overshadow religious meaning. Following Hegel, such interpretation focuses not on intrinsic but on extrinsic systems of messaging. Instead, this book engages the Quran as a guide to perception with which other discourses – legal, philosophical, and poetic – were deeply engaged within a pre-secular worldview. It adopts a literary approach to the Quran akin to that promoted by modernist theologians, often ostracized by puritanical interpreters demanding an anachronistic orthodoxy contradicted in the lived history of the Islamic world.⁵⁰ Scriptural orthodoxy has been supported in the Orientalist tradition as well, from the

⁴⁹ Vilchez, 2017: 30. ⁵⁰ Abu-Zayd, 2003: 39; Toorawa, 2009.

nineteenth century to the modern era. The understanding of original text as scripture directly establishing norms presumes a relationship with the legacies of the Prophet analogous to that presumed by the nineteenth-century *sola scriptura* movement in Protestant thought, ignoring the lived, discursive history of religions – here, Islam.⁵¹

While one approach to Islam has emphasized history, another has emphasized spirituality as distinct from orthodoxy. Sufism has often been connected to vague New Age mysticism, akin to the recycling of aspects of Hinduism into Yoga in the late nineteenth century or Zen Buddhism into contemporary art in the mid-twentieth. One translator of Sufi poetry, Reynold Nicholson (1868–1945), even misread the earliest extended theorization of Sufism in Persian, *Kashf al-mahjub* (Uncovering of the veiled) by Abu Hasan al-Hujwiri (d. 1077), as discounting ritual Islamic practice entirely, even though it explains rather that ritual must not be followed blindly, but should be enhanced through the spiritual training enabled through Sufi ritual and thought.⁵²

This book considers Sufism as intrinsic to the lived history of Islamic spirituality and perceptual experience throughout its geographies. The connections between rulers and Sufis throughout the Islamic world attest to this centrality. The esoteric approach to Islam inherent in Isma'ili Shi'a thought was integral to the establishment of Islam across North Africa in the eighth to tenth centuries. The Seljuqs of Rum (1037–1308) in the former Eastern Roman Empire supported the seminal intellectuals of Sufism, Shahib al-Din Yahya Suhrawardi (1154–1191), ibn Arabi (1165–1240), and Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207–1273), as well as the preeminent poet Nizami of Ganj (1141–1209), who popularized many Sufi themes in his work. The Abbasid caliph al-Nasir al-Din Allah (1181–1223) brought the Sufi shaykh Shahab al-Din Umar al-Suhrawardi (1145–1234), who expanded the Suhrawardiyya order, to his court to unify the practice of spiritual chivalry (*futuwat*), which recognized 'Ali as the conjunction of spiritual guidance with knightly valor, establishing the caliph as its focus.⁵³ Jami (1410–1492), poet and shaykh of the Naqshibandi order, served as court theologian during the Timurid Empire (1370–1507); his brother-in-law, Husayn Wa'iz Kashifi Sabzawari (d. 1504), wrote a popular guide to spiritual chivalry that aided its widespread dissemination. Ottoman rulers considered ibn Arabi as akin to a patron saint of the dynasty, and followed the Mevlevi order guided by the wisdom of Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207–1273).⁵⁴ In the

⁵¹ Fudge, 2006; Fowden, 2015:4. ⁵² al-Hujwiri, 1959: xi. ⁵³ Sabzawari, 2000: xiii.

⁵⁴ Knysh, 1999: 4.

meantime, their private guard, the Janissaries, followed the Bektashi order. The Safavid dynasty (1501–1736) legitimated itself through affiliation with the Safaviyya order. The Suhrawardi-inspired Chisti order informed the Mughal Empire (1526–1540, 1555–1857) in India. During the same period, Sufism became integral to wielding power in African cities such as Timbuktu.⁵⁵ It enabled the power of the shaykh of the Qadiriyya order, ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jazari (1808–1883) in resisting French colonial incursions into Algeria in the 1830s. Although periodically controversial among jurists, Sufi hermeneutics were included in the official Ottoman curriculum from at least the mid-sixteenth century, making the thought of ibn Arabi in particular common from the Balkans to the Caucasus and from Algeria to the Arabian Peninsula.⁵⁶ Throughout, poetry incorporating Sufi thought was central to cultural production even if not all Muslims or governments have participated in or approved of Sufism.

The quest for union with the divine indicated in Sufism was pursued in several ways: rare individual insight; the staged path offered through communal ritual taught in dervish orders; inspired and descriptive prose guidebooks; and poetry. The latter two traditions function within the category of *‘adab*, an Arabic word (used as well in Persian, Turkish, and Urdu) that indicates spiritual cultivation often compared with the Greek *paideia*. Its reduction in modern educational systems to ‘literature’ may have limited recognition of its epistemic centrality in understanding Islamic intellectual history.⁵⁷

Given the intimate relationship between many images and the poetic texts they illustrate, it is surprising that art-historical analysis has largely limited itself to identifying narratives rather than recognizing the theoretical and visual information conveyed in poetry. Grabar simultaneously indicates and dismisses the possibility of using poetry as a source about art, finding that its lack of specificity makes it a weaker source than critical or theoretical expositions.⁵⁸ Similarly, James Montgomery notes that the modern discipline of Islamic Studies often disregards poetry as “rarely taken seriously as a legitimate discourse for the expression of theological, philosophical, or even religious or political ideas (and so is consequently marginalized in favour of heresiographical or annalistic materials).”⁵⁹ While poetry has served as an analytical source in individual studies, it has yet to become a disciplinary mainstay.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Gomez, 2018: 284.

⁵⁶ Ahmed and Filipovic, 2004; Knysh, 1999; Çalış-Kural, 2014: 46; Elias, 2012: 227–228.

⁵⁷ Allan, 2012: 175. ⁵⁸ Grabar, 1973: 3; Grabar, 1992: 233. ⁵⁹ Montgomery, 2011: 77.

⁶⁰ Necipoğlu, 1995; Behrens-Abouseif, 1998; Akkash, 2005a; Elias, 2012; Vilchez, 2017; Kia, 2006.

Supplementing traditional categories such as period and style governing established art-historical analysis, the trans-temporal and trans-regional discourse of *'adab* expresses the multiple anamorphic possibilities of existing outside binary frameworks such as us and them, then and now. This approach allows for the anamorphosis governing cultural identifications and boundaries to shift. Donald Preziosi points out that “art history and museums of art consequently establish certain conditions of reading objects and images in such a way as to foreground the rhetorical economies of metaphorical and metonymic relationships. Both situate their users (operators) in anamorphic positions from which the ‘history’ of art may be seen as unfolding, almost magically, before their eyes.”⁶¹ Yet an anamorphic position can look from multiple sides. It is queer. Its inherent openness to change offers the strength of possibility rather than the instability of requiring a fixed position to recognize a single truth.

Poetry provides a powerful cultural substrate for such a position because its readership frequently transcends time and space in circulating the language of cultivated faith. Occupying the same mental space as memorized passages of the Quran, to which it frequently referred, memorization enhanced the cultural power of poetry. As Nile Green explains:

The Quran was a text ‘recited’ in speech, preferably from memory, and the learning habits that surrounded it affected wider attitudes towards book-learning. The self-replicating traditions of Quran learners were long lasting and widespread, inculcating attitudes among the religious classes that valued internalizing books over owning them. In a period of hand-produced books, readers seem to have read more deeply than widely.⁶²

This had a powerful effect on all aspects of literary culture, in which poetry circulated through appropriate quotation and recognition reinforcing a shared cultural canon. This circulation of knowledge was part of a process of self-reflexive cultural production sustained between past and present, whether in the form of literary traditions, histories, or dreams and visions of departed sages.⁶³ Performed at social gatherings, often accompanied by music and enjoyed with food and drink, poetry circulated socially and legitimated participation in elite circles.⁶⁴

Regarding perception, poetry provided meanings exceeding those of demonstrative texts. Although Quranic passages (Q26:224–227) decried poets analogously with Plato’s critique of sophistry, poetry remained the

⁶¹ Preziosi, 1992: 382. ⁶² Green, 2010: 244–245. ⁶³ Green, 2003: 288.

⁶⁴ Shortle, 2018: 45–48, 54.

primary artistic vehicle in the Islamic world.⁶⁵ The preeminent philosopher Abu ‘Ali al-Husain ibn Sina (980–1037) describes poetry as imaginative speech that addresses the soul directly, producing feelings of pleasure and astonishment. He suggests that the very fact that it is considered a ‘weak’ form of rational thought in the sciences of logic enables it to appeal to and reflect intuitive sensibilities.⁶⁶ Thus it often reveals that which is assumed rather than explained, providing insight into the intimate, internal space of perception. Dust Muhammad exhorted his readers to refer to the poetic tradition to understand the functions of art.⁶⁷ This suggestion informs the centrality of poetry in this book as expressing cultural roles for perception. Rather than following a story determined by a historical sequence based on when and where objects were produced, this book examines how texts frame encounters with cultural experience. It examines poetry in its own right as productive of images, and then interprets visual illustrations of this poetry as a further source of meaning, often altering, emphasizing, or refining meanings in the poetic text.

This contrasts dominant empirical art historical methods favoring documentary and material sources, emphasizing issues of production and patronage, and preferring secular to spiritual knowledge as a means of understanding the world. Thus the question ‘What is Islamic about Islamic art?’ has not been central to academic art history, even as the textual turn since the 1990s has energized the field.⁶⁸ Spiritualist attempts to familiarize Islam through appeals to mysticism were dismissed as essentializing.⁶⁹ Yet if the risk of thinking about Islamic art as Islamic is to essentialize everything Islamic as religious, then the risk of thinking of Islamic art only through a secular lens is to ignore the centrality of faith in human experience. Islamic art becomes something external to Muslims that paradoxically insists on representing them.

The peripheralization of Islam from discourses of Islamic art results from a secular privatization and restriction of religion to specific times and places. Rather, Islam – like all religions and ideologies – determines epistemic frameworks through which to experience the world. Just as European Christianity underpins the episteme of art history, Islamic discourses underpin a distinct episteme.

This episteme requires a new vocabulary of engagement. This need resembles the critical turn of the ‘new’ art history of the 1980s, in which Norman Bryson called for an art history that reconsiders its terms, asking,

⁶⁵ Plato, 2000: 83. ⁶⁶ Lelli, 2014. ⁶⁷ Roxburgh, 2001: 177. ⁶⁸ Necipoğlu, 2012: 4.

⁶⁹ Massignon, 1921; Akkach, 2005a: 9–17; Lenssen, 2008.

“What is a painting? What is its relation to perception? To power? To tradition?”⁷⁰ At the time, this call informed the growth of visual cultural studies, applying analytical techniques previously reserved for art to the rest of visual experience. An Islamic episteme must move further, beyond an oculocentric premise, and toward an expanded appreciation of the senses. It must ask not ‘what makes an image Islamic?’ but ‘what is an image?’ Not ‘how is ornament used in Islam?’ but ‘how does surface function beyond our designation as ornament?’ Not ‘why did Islamic art lack realism?’ or ‘how did Islamic art develop realism?’ but ‘what constitutes reality?’ Recent art history has emphasized historiography as a means of recognizing the contingency of the discipline. Yet art historians have not yet worked out how to dismantle and remodel the walls and passages defining the norms and exclusions of its disciplinary episteme under a colonial mindset. We must conceive of these less as fortresses than as stage sets, mobile structures that enable and restrict the performances of our thought.

To this end, this book provisionally relinquishes the study of ‘art history’ by exploring an alternative episteme conceived as ‘perceptual culture.’ Perceptual culture comprises the culturally informed reception of created entities not preordained through hierarchies of senses, materials, or materiality. In contrast to European oculocentrism, it refers to a multisensory realm such as that expressed by al-Hujwiri:

The means of acquiring knowledge are five: hearing, sight, taste, smell, and touch. God has created for the mind these five avenues, and has made every kind of knowledge depend on one of them. Four of the five senses are situated in a special organ, but one, namely touch, is diffused over the whole body. It is possible, however, that this diffusion . . . may be shared by any of the other senses . . . God has sent Apostles with true evidences, but belief in His Apostles does not become obligatory until the obligatoriness of knowing God is achieved by hearing.⁷¹

When we focus on visibility alone, we can understand how to situate objects from other cultures in our own categories; but to understand other cultures, such as those of Islam, we need to be open to senses beyond the visual, not divided by mind and body, and at times not even localized. Perceptual culture emerges not from what is produced, but from culturally informed reception. It includes not only beautiful things such as paintings, sculpture, tiles, carpets, or vessels normally considered in Islamic art history, but also music, geometries, and dream images. While not

⁷⁰ Bryson, 1983: xi. ⁷¹ al-Hujwiri, 1959: 393.

addressed in this book, it also includes the confluence of interior and exterior spaces, discourses of generosity and nourishment, and engagements with touch, taste, and scent.⁷²

The study of perceptual culture emphasizes reception over production, replacing historicism with an accretion of experience best modeled through duration. Henri Bergson (1859–1941) describes duration:

Pure duration is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states . . . [it] forms both the past and the present states into an organic whole, as happens when we recall the notes of a tune, melting, so to speak, into one another . . . [comparable] to a living being whose parts, although distinct, permeate one another just because they are so closely connected.⁷³

Focusing on sensory concepts over individual works, the study of perceptual culture resists Hegelian historicism, and its recognition of art objects as points at the intersection of temporal and spatial vectors. Valorizing artistic context and intention, this practice paradoxically dehistoricizes the historical mutability of meaning as objects traverse time and space. Everything – texts as well as the books in which they are written; bowls and decanters; mihrabs and mosques – transcend the moment of their production. They may start with one meaning, become irrelevant, and reemerge in an entirely new context. Objects are not, in themselves, historical, yet histories accrue to them. It is the discipline of art history, and its enactment in the museum, that historicizes objects, viewing linear time as the primary mode through which to access culture frozen in the past.

Emerging through discursive conditioning, perceptual culture reflects reception rather than production. By immersing ourselves in discourse, this analytical practice enables a sort of time travel: we can step into a discursive framework through which to perceive the world other-wise, while also not letting go of the attitudes and analyses that seem natural to us as moderns. This expanded framework complicates the seemingly stable premises of Western art history. Constructing a dialogue between regionalized fields, it undermines the structure of center and periphery inherent to the additive globalization of art historical analysis. Along with other art histories, Islamic art history should not constitute a ghetto, but enable a critical engagement with ideas interacting across space and time.

⁷² Shortle, 2018 engages extensively with poetry, scent, and touch.

⁷³ Pearson and Maoilearca, 2014: 72.

Islamic art perceptual culture can do much more than indicate a shared humanity that any non-racist never should have doubted in the first place. It can represent the many ways in which the material world has interacted with faith in cultures of Islam, and the difficulties of drawing boundaries between faiths. It can do more than describe a culture; it can break through the preconceptions conditioning a boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ It can communicate how people of faith engage with the world, and why this has been important in the objects that we identify as Islamic art. It can speak for an Islam with conceptual cohesion underlying diverse material and ethereal manifestations. Above and beyond enhancing our understanding of an Islamic other, it can enable the sharing of ideas across times and cultures, enriching the possibilities through which we moderns apprehend our world.

The theorization of Islamic perceptual culture demonstrates the limitations of the study of ‘art’ through the lens of ‘history’ not because Islam is lacking in relation to disciplinary norms, but because these norms are lacking in relation to Islam. Recognizing this, Necipoğlu points to the possibility of discovering intrinsic terms through the study of metaphysical discussions.

As in medieval Europe, which did not have an aesthetics independent of scholastic philosophy, in the Islamic world concepts of beauty often were embedded in metaphysical discussions. The relevance of such philosophical texts for architectural and artisanal production has not yet been explored systematically. Conceptual categories provided by Islamic intellectual history have been ignored by art historians who focus on the hard date of archaeology, epigraphy, historical sources, and standard religious texts. The positivist formal studies that dominate the field of Islamic art and architecture (which ultimately grew out of nineteenth-century Orientalist archaeology and museology) treat buildings and objects as items to be cataloged in terms of geographic regions, style, typology, inscriptions, decorative techniques, and factual data on artists and patrons. The few interpretive studies emphasize the political and ideological contexts of art and architecture, largely overlooking more elusive questions about aesthetic philosophy.⁷⁴

Similarly recognizing the insufficiencies of post-Enlightenment empiricism, Persis Berlekamp suggests that “in the medieval Islamic milieu, ancient images, whether replicas or originals, were conceptually linked with mutability – not just of time, but of cosmic space and hierarchy.”⁷⁵ This does not mean that objects lacked a physical history, but that this history was not necessarily understood as the only or most meaningful way

⁷⁴ Necipoğlu, 1995: 185–186. ⁷⁵ Berlekamp, 2011: 76.

of situating them in a cosmology in which our mundane physical world is but a small cross-section of creation.

Setting research in Islamic studies, literature, and art history in conversation, this book attempts such theorization. Rather than understanding objects as historical, this study renders them as suprahistorical, engaging with the world not only in the physicality of their creation but within a textuality transcending linear time and place. Rather than understanding texts through their histories as manuscripts and translations, this approach explores meanings reverberating across texts. Expanding the analytic field from the material to the immaterial, including musical, poetic, and dream images, it shifts emphasis from production to reception. It encourages an empirical engagement with sources that acknowledge not only the meanings in, but also the emotional relationship with worlds of parable, imagination, and belief. It gives priority to a context of intellectual over political history, and recognizes what we call religion as indivisible from intellectual life preceding modern notions of secularism. It argues that there would be no paradox to 'Islamic art' if both 'Islam' and 'art' were conceived with greater nuance. The problem is not the poor fit of categories claiming their own natural and innocent truth, but failure to recognize that the game of categorize and conquer becomes an a priori affirmation of difference and hierarchy.

Despite efforts to secularize Islamic art through nationalized, linguistic, ethnic, and political parameters, I see no clearer way of comprehending the connections within its vast diversity than through Islam. This should not be understood as a claim that everything Islamic necessarily pertains to religion, so much as that religion always pertains to how people engage with the world and beyond. Rather than reifying an essential Islam, these discourses expand and complicate our modern definitions of Islam in its multiple interactions between the human, the worldly, and the divine. In an era that pits increasingly global Islamic puritanism against increasingly racialized Islamophobia, the legacy of Islamic art offers material signs for Islam's diverse and multivocal expressions.

Chapter 1 discusses the supposed 'prohibition of the image' in Islam. Explaining the logic of Islamic law through the history of its development during the first centuries of Islam, it traces contemporary Islamic assertions of the prohibition against an abridged history of Islamic legal interpretation. It then examines how the sources through which European scholars describe this ban conceive of images. Far from expressing the same concerns about iconoclasm as in Abrahamic scripture, Islamic sources reflect an understanding of mimesis deeply intertwined with

philosophical traditions inherited through late antiquity. This observation institutes two themes in the work: the affinities of Islamic thought with ancient philosophical, Abrahamic, and Buddhist legacies; and how modern interpretations of similar sources led Europe down a very different interpretive path.

As in late antiquity, one of the primary subjects of sensory inquiry was not the image, but music. [Chapter 2](#) considers how juridical discussions of music reflected antique traditions of inward mimesis. The centrality of music in the Islamic intellectual corpus undermines the oculo-centrism of art history, offering instead a field of multimedial perceptual culture. [Chapter 3](#) examines discussions about the mimetic possibilities of musical and visual images as reflected in the *Iskandarnamah* of Nizami of Ganj and *The Language of the Birds* by Farid al-Din Attar. The intimacy of the poetry with Platonic thought suggests that far from inimical, philosophy and Islamic discourses may be indivisible.

The heart funnels perception through the ear to the soul. [Chapter 4](#) considers how an ontology of perception rooted in the heart emerged from a hierarchy of the senses implicit in the Quran. It contrasts the complex ontology of the Quran as representation of the divine tablet as simultaneously writing and sound, always complete and always immanent, with secular interpretations of its material history. It explores how the emotive response to Quranic beauty reverberates with discourses of the heart, the imaginary, and the contemplative faculties in Islamic thought.

[Chapter 5](#) traces the heart as a polished mirror in transformations of the story of the competition of the artists as retold by al-Ghazali, Nizami, Rumi, and ibn Khaldun. This story about artistic competition serves as a parable for the relative merits of Aristotelian demonstrative and symbolic teaching, and the nature of mimesis, competition, and originality. [Chapter 6](#) examines how later stories about artistic competition, related by al-Maqrizi, Mustafa 'Ali, and Qadi Ahmad consider painting in the context of deceptive rhetoric in pursuit of truth, as advocated in Plato's *Phaedrus*. The chapter concludes by comparing this understanding of painting with that rooted in a similar story, the competition of Zeuxis and Parrhasius. Adopted from antiquity by German Enlightenment thinkers as the paradigm for representation and the disinterested observer, this story establishes paradigms of artistry and mimesis in the Western tradition that cannot account for opposite premises established in Islamic discourses. The comparison between the two narratives underscores the antique tradition as part of a shared Islamic and European heritage diverging through distinct histories of interpretation.

Chapter 7 examines the trope of the ephemeral image, transcended on the journey to truth. Examples include stories of identifying portraits of Alexander and the Prophet Muhammad, portraits which identify the beloved as in Nizami's *Shirin and Khosrau*, the visionary journeys of the Prophet Muhammad, the dream in the Cave of the Seven Sleepers, and the story of the three princes and the gallery of paintings in the Fortress of Form, first related by Jalal al-Din Rumi. These stories articulate the theme of the image as both structuring and limiting our conceptions of the world.

In contrast to the transcendent image that elides idolatry by disappearing, the transgressive image enables the believer to transcend the self through sinful peril. Through the Abrahamic romance of the Prophet Joseph and Zuleikha transformed from Judaic and Islamic exegesis to poetry, and Attar's tale of Shaykh San'an in *Language of the Birds*, Chapter 8 explores the transgressive image. It then contrasts the mystical, humanizing interpretation embodied in these tales with a sociosexual interpretation of the same romance in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe.

Often conceived as the abstract counterpoint to the supposedly absent representational image, geometry suffuses visual cultures of the Islamic world. Chapter 9 examines its theorization in relation to legacies of Sufi cosmology and music. While often contrasted with European representational traditions, the geometry of Islamic pattern is, like perspective, an optical device structuring surface treatment. Yet far from being merely a representational tool, perspective has become a dominant metaphor for many aspects of modern subjectivity, including rationalism, mastery, and domination. What, then, does it mean to lack perspective? To answer this question, Chapter 10 reevaluates European perspectivalism by tracing the distinction between perspective as a painting technique and its philosophical association with subjectivity from the Renaissance to modernity.

Using the paradigms developed in the first ten chapters, the Conclusion imagines an art history that relinquishes the perspectival paradigm of art history in favor of a multifocal approach. Subjective, interested, transmedial, decentered, and atemporal, it offers an alternative paradigm through which to apprehend the world. It suggests how the study of perceptual cultures in Islamic thought can contribute not only to the study of Islamic arts and cultures, but also to a more egalitarian epistemic configuration of global art histories.

Any study of 'another' culture necessarily produces a mirror for that conceived as our own. My hope is that the counterpoint that emerges

through Islamic discourses will play against our accustomed melodies of art history, evoking harmonies and dissonances so that we learn to enjoy multiple tunes, from a multitude of worlds, simultaneously. May these perspectives proliferate like light flashing off the facets of a crystal as it fractures into the deceptively simple intricacy of rainbows.

Someone otherwise ignorant about Islam often knows two things: Muslim women must veil; and Islam prohibits images. Like much of popular knowledge, neither is entirely accurate. Rather, diverse practices of veiling and representation have emerged across the vast geography, cultural plurality, and millennium of Islamic histories. This universalizing misconception of Islam through the trope of sight says more about Western cultures than about Islam: it defines how we think of others as looking out onto the world, and it insists on our right to see them.

Why is the so-called image prohibition made out to be so important? Images neither determine survival nor define humanity. In a world where the visual arts no longer emphasize verisimilitude, why has the image become such a litmus test of civilization? Why does the historical plenitude of all sorts of images in the Islamic world, ranging from theological narratives to pornography, fail to automatically refute their supposed absence? The repetition of the accusation, despite all evidence to the contrary, suggests that the image at hand is never a picture, but a symbol of alterity to the 'West.' Its symbolism contrasts multiple cultures of a supposed 'East': the Orthodox Church, with its distinctive discourse of the image following the iconoclastic controversy starting in the eighth century; the Judaic sanction of the image rooted in biblical injunctions against idolatry; and the comparable absence of votive images in Islam.¹ Both Catholic and Protestant European Christian theological traditions establish norms for what an image is supposed to do: express narrative through visual verisimilitude with a normative depiction of space. The discourse in Islam is more diffuse. Attempts to pin it down often reflect modern expectations more than discussions of the image in Islamic thought.

Transcultural thought requires a revised notion of the image. As contemporary art relies increasingly on concepts over forms, our understandings of past arts similarly need to engage the ideas behind, and not simply the histories of, objects. As Socrates said, "Do you see then, my friend, that we must look for a different standard of correctness for images ... and not

¹ Elkins, 2013: 43–83.

make presence or absence of particular features a necessary condition for something to be an image? Surely you realize that images are far from having the same properties as the things whose images they are?”²

1.1 A Lived History for Islamic Origins

The image *of* Islam informs our understanding of the image *in* Islam. If we think of Islam only through the narrative of its foundation, we ignore how it emerges across time. It is this real, sedimentary history, in which Islam regenerates its meanings, in which culture and perception form. Before considering the image in Islam, this section aims to provide a brief summary of histories and concepts necessary for thinking of Islam with increasing nuance throughout the text.

Islamic historiography traditionally begins with the rupture between the era of ignorance (*jahiliyya*) preceding the revelation of the Quran and the acceptance (*islam*) of the will of God. This divine will was expressed through the angelic enunciation of the sacred word (the *Quran*) to the Prophet Muhammad (570–632). Revelation took place in parts, between the first in 610 and his death in 632.³ The first revelation is believed to have taken place during his meditation in the Cave Hira, near his home in Mecca. Islamic historiography recognizes the initial converts as members of the tribes surrounding the Prophet who practiced polytheistic faiths as well as some who practiced Christianity. Islamic ritual repurposes the practice of worship through circumambulation of their primary shrine, the Kaaba, as marking the first altar given by God to Adam and revered by the prophet Abraham. The Kaaba also marks the Prophet Muhammad’s 632 reconquest of Mecca after his exile (*hijra*) with his followers in the nearby city of Yathrib (later renamed Medina) in 622, marking the beginning of the Islamic calendar.

Despite the paucity of physical traces, reconstructions of these early years of Islam have been central in struggles for legitimation in Islamic leadership. Modern puritanical movements have argued in favor of a singular, authentic Islam rooted among the first generation of Muslims (*salaf*) in the Arabian Peninsula during the first thirty years of the faith.

² Halliwell, 2002: 46 (Plato, *Cratylus* 432a–d).

³ The root *s-l-m* in Arabic and Hebrew indicates peace, thus ‘selam’ and ‘shalom’ as greetings. *Islam* is the practice of greeting/bowing, thus accepting the will of God. A *Muslim* is the person who does this. The common translation of Islam as ‘submission’ often leads to a misunderstanding of Islam as involving submissiveness, thus naturalizing authoritarianism.

This has enhanced the impression of Islam as an independent entity distinct from precedents and perennially corrupted after its inception.⁴ Conversely, this book reflects the understanding that, far from a pure Islam corrupted through transcultural interaction, the history of lived Islam emerged in an interplay between its origins and its lived environments, incorporating the perceptual cultures of late antiquity, the Abrahamic tradition, as well as a multiplicity of later cultural and religious interactions.

A generation after the death of the Prophet, a disagreement concerning leadership of the faithful led to a split between the followers of the established path (*sunna*, giving rise to the designation *sunni* Muslims) and followers of the party (*shi'a*) of the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (601–661) and his descendants. Although in modern times often portrayed as a split akin to that between Catholics and Protestants, the importance of the distinction was not historically consistent.⁵ Both trends existed from the early era of Islam, and neither consolidated in a hegemonic form in the first century. Shi'a Islam held periodic sway over politically significant premodern dynasties. Often, it offered a position of protest within Sunni majority regions. Literature reflects the complex mixing of theological and philosophical discourses. Scholars often sustained multiple affiliations that undermine the apparently clear sectarian distinctions normalized during times of conflict, including our own. Cultures, then and now, are complicated; the label of 'sectarian difference' often represents political as much as doctrinal tensions.

Constitutive systems of Islam converged slowly through the codification of the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet (*Hadith*) and development of methods to use these texts as a foundation for Islamic law (*Sharia*), combining Jewish hermeneutics with ancient Greek thought inherited through Sasanian transmission. Changing geographies of Islam reflected controversies over succession as the Umayyad dynasty declared a caliphate led from Damascus in the late seventh century.⁶ Many new Muslims were not peninsular Arabs, complicating the simplistic model of a single, Arabian era of ignorance (*jahiliyya*). On the contrary, Greek persisted as an administrative language until the eighth century. The complex visual

⁴ Ahmed, 2015: 80–82. ⁵ Mulder, 2014.

⁶ A caliph is the political successor to the Prophet Muhammad. Among (majority) Sunni Muslims, such leadership was abolished following the 1922 fall of the Ottoman Empire. Shi'a Muslims recognize a different leadership, the imamate, based on inspired spiritual leadership from the lineage of 'Ali; some Shi'a leaders have also adopted the title of caliph.

iconography, executed in mosaic and three-dimensional sculpture, in Umayyad architecture underscores cultural continuity with Roman and Sasanian precedents during the institutionalization of Islam.⁷

Although the Quran is at the core of Islam, its historical origins remain unclear. Standard interpretations suggest that in a largely oral culture, believers who memorized the revelation trusted the human mind as the most secure transmitter of Quranic recitations from believer to believer over that of writing, subject to destruction or desecration. Some scholars differ, indicating Quranic and *Hadith* references to Muhammad himself writing down the revelations, as well as their later abrogation or cancelation.⁸ By the mid-seventh century, multiple recensions of the Quran competed for authority. The consolidation of these versions into a single codex, the supposed destruction of all other versions, and the reproduction and distribution of a single redaction under the caliph 'Uthman (r. 644–656) represented one of the formative attempts under the so-called Rightly Guided Caliphs (*salah*), before the Shi'a split, in the creation of a single, institutionalized, hegemonic understanding of Islam. Some contemporary scholars of the Quran go so far as to suggest that this consolidation was compiled not from multiple recensions of the same text, but from multiple sacred texts, including some shared by Christian and Jewish communities, and even suggest that the revelation was an anachronistic foundational narrative established under the Umayyad dynasty.⁹ Whatever the origin, the text compiled under 'Uthman became the dominant recension of the Quran.

This record of Prophetic revelations was soon supplemented by biographies of the Prophet, which began to appear under the first Umayyad caliph, Mu'awiya (r. 661–680), coinciding with religious institutionalization. Most of these biographies survive primarily in later canonical compilations. These emerged as part of the ninth-century growth of literary culture fostered under the Abbasid dynasty, which gained control over the caliphate in 750 and moved Islamic rule to Baghdad in 762.

The Umayyad caliphate had brought the basic Quranic text at the heart of Islam into an administrative and cultural environment dominated by Orthodox Christian precepts in a Greek-language environment. By insisting that only Arabs could be true Muslims, they assured their sovereignty and gained wealth by taxing converts. But they made many enemies. Their Abbasid challengers capitalized on this enmity by removing the linguistic/ethnic requirement for being Muslim. The Abbasids soon conquered the

⁷ Grabar, 1993. ⁸ Modarressi, 1993. ⁹ Neuwirth, 2003.

caliphate in the Levant. Surviving members of the Umayyad dynasty migrated to North Africa and Spain, where they continued to rule until the eleventh century, and culture flourished in close communication with both local Christian dynasties and the Eastern Islamic world.

The cultural openness of the Abbasids was reflected in the promotion of translation and the incorporation of philosophical legacies from antiquity in the administrative and intellectual discourses constructing Islam. They inherited the sophisticated intellectual environment fostered by the Sasanian promotion of philosophy after its ejection from Christianized Rome. In 529 the Roman emperor Justinian I (r. 527–565) had issued an edict against pagan teaching, expelling philosophers from the School of Athens. Scholars from Alexandria, Antioch, Edessa, and Harran came together with Sabeian scholars under Sasanian patronage. The Sasanian king Khosrau (r. 531–579), known as Anoushirwan, established libraries in cities such as Jundishapur to contain translations of Hellenistic texts into Pahlavi (Middle Persian) as well as the poetic accounts of history written for the pleasure of kings. As Zoroastrians, they believed that all knowledge had been given to the prophet Zoroaster in a book comprising 12,000 volumes. They developed a narrative that when Alexander the Great conquered Persia in 334–324 BCE, he had destroyed everything, but had arranged for the translation of all the books of Istakhr (a city 5 kilometers north of Persepolis) into Greek. His armies had transferred this library to Egypt, causing the global dispersal of knowledge. Through this story, Sasanian rulers established an ideology dependent on a culture of translation as the foundation of all civilization, a wealth protected in their libraries. Yet this wealth was not limited to Greek philosophy. During the same era, Anoushirwan is said to have sent his physician Borzuya to India to acquire what would become the most widely disseminated secular work of the Islamic world, *Kalila and Dimna*, offering ethical and princely wisdom in the popular form of animal fables.¹⁰

The Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun (r. 813–833) adopted the Sasanian institutionalization of translation under the name *buyut al-hikma*, or houses of wisdom: relatively modest translation bureaus designed to enrich the intellectual coffers of the state. The Sasanian understanding of knowledge as universal and translatable thus became central to the Abbasid translation movement of the eighth and ninth centuries, during which diverse philosophical works were translated into Arabic and incorporated into the thriving Islamic theological, philosophical, and scientific thought of Baghdad. One of

¹⁰ Gutas, 1998: 36–42.

the first texts translated was Aristotle's *Topics*, which introduced classical methods of disputation into the Abbasid administrative toolbox as well as the systematic debate being developed by religious scholars.¹¹ Other early translations included Plotinus' *Enneads*, and summaries of four Platonic dialogues by the Pergamonian physician Galen (130–210). Translation featured not only philosophy, but also tales and epics that long remained central to Islamic literary culture. These include the eighth-century Syriac and Arabic translations of fables from India as the popular *Kalila and Dimna*, which circulated further through Rudaki's early tenth-century translation into Persian verse, and the ninth-century translation of Alexandrian epics from Syriac into Arabic.¹² Translation engaged with commentary, rewriting, and dissemination.¹³ The translation of ancient Greek works into Arabic, often through intermediary Syriac translations, took place within a much wider atmosphere of cultural mixing through the integration of multiple ethnic, linguistic, and intellectual traditions into the evolving discursive sphere of Islam. Although often glossed as a vague relationship with 'Neoplatonism,' longlasting and sophisticated engagement with these sources can be traced in many facets of Islamic literature and perceptual culture.

This era of translation coincided with the emergence of Islamic law. The methodical juridical use of precedent (*taqlid* or imitation) and reasoned interpretation (*ijtihad*) of the Quran and *Hadith* emerged in the thought of Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i (767–820).¹⁴ Muhammad al-Bukhari (810–870) edited the earliest compilation of *Hadith* based on verified lineages of transmission (*isnad*) through the oral tradition. Without a method governing these traditions, however, hundreds of interpretive systems soon competed for authority. By the end of the century, this multiplicity of legal interpretive practices was reduced through a state-sponsored inquisition (*mihna*) pitting philosophical against literalist approaches to the Quran. The Abbasid caliphs initially supported an interpretive regime that accepted philosophy as central to Islamic interpretation. However, the

¹¹ Gutas, 1998: 61.

¹² Stoneman (1991) translates compiled legends attributed to Callisthenes of Olynthus (360–228 BCE), a great-nephew of Aristotle who became historian of Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE) when Aristotle served as his tutor. However, as the legends include events after the death of Callisthenes, who was executed for criticizing Alexander's adoption of Persian court ritual, the unknown author is now called Pseudo-Callisthenes. The popularity of these legends was reflected in their ninth-century translation from Syriac into Arabic, perpetuating the importance of Alexander the Great in Islamic literature. See Stoneman, Erickson, and Netton, 2012. The popularity of the genre may relate to the association with the figure Dhu'l-Qarnayn (the two-horned one) in Q18:83–102, although the potential Syriac source identified by Theodor Nöldeke in 1890 remains controversial. Bladel, 2008.

¹³ Brentjes, 2008. ¹⁴ Gutas, 1988: 36–42.

state reversed its position and philosophy was formally outlawed as part of legal interpretation. Nonetheless, it remained central to intellectual life and was disseminated through the poetic arts.

The complicated politics of this event resonated throughout later Islamic intellectual history. With grounding in philosophy, the theological school known as the Mu'tazila argued that the principle of the divine unity of God (*tawhid*), reflecting the transcendence and uniqueness of God, rendered divine attributes metaphorical rather than material. Affirming free will within divine predestination and recognizing reason as essential to human action and scriptural interpretation, they interpreted the Quran as a translation of divine essence into terms suitable for human comprehension. They viewed God as the creator who set creation in motion without interfering with its function. The design of the world was essentially the design of God.

The Abbasid caliphs initially supported Mu'tazilite theology, perhaps because they had also resisted the Umayyads – their name (which means 'to withdraw' or 'to secede') may refer to their withdrawal to their home city of Basra in response to suppression of the Shi'a. In 833 the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun instituted an inquisition (*mihna*) that required Islamic scholars to attest to the created nature of the Quran.¹⁵ However, this position was contested by literalist interpreters, the most prominent of whom was Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780–855). He held that the Quran should narrowly govern all aspects of Islamic life. Taking references to the anthropomorphic attributes of God implied in the Quran literally, he believed in divine predestination and argued against free will (Q38:75, 55:27, 20:5). Ibn Hanbal's refusal to acquiesce to the inquisition bolstered his reputation under the caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–861), who reversed and terminated this inquisition in 848.

The controversy was quelled when Abu al-Hasan 'Ali al-Ash'ari (d. 936) articulated a position mediating rational inquiry and divine omnipotence.¹⁶ Reflecting Mu'tazilite incorporation of Platonic occasionalism, he asserted that the world is composed of elements that are ultimately reducible to minimal parts (atoms). Reflecting a literalist position, he asserted that the behavior of these atoms in every instant is subject to the continual will of God. There are thus no laws of nature. Each instant expresses God's will. Since God works logically, instantaneous divine acts appear with a regularity that allows us to perceive them as natural laws.

¹⁵ Fowden, 2015: 157. ¹⁶ Martin, 2002.

In the meantime, the Fatimid dynasty (909–1171) of North Africa quickly grew into a rival caliphate from their capital city in Cairo. Isma'ili Shi'a tracing their descent from the seventh Imam (leader) after 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Fatimids claimed sovereignty based on divine guidance to interpret beyond the superficial (*zahiri*) to the intrinsic (*batini*) meaning of the Quran. In 945 the Buyid dynasty (934–1062), which had sympathy for the Twelver Shi'a (who claimed descent from the twelfth Imam), took the Abbasid caliphate as a vassal state. Resisting the growing strength of the Shi'a, the Abbasid caliph al-Qadir (r. 991–1031) issued an edict in 1017 in which he claimed to 'close the doors of interpretation.' Yet the edict failed to eliminate the practice of rationalist argument and interpretation: philosophy was not only already ingrained in the Islamic legal system, it continued as part of scholarly education.¹⁷

A systematic educational and legal system emerged for the first time in the late eleventh century, when the Nizamiyya Madrasa, instituted by the Seljuq grand vizier Nizam al-Mulk (1018–1092), established a system of reasoned debate based in the four approved schools of law. Islam developed through the discourse of these schools of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), each of which favored different *Hadith* and legitimated different discursive procedures balancing precedent and interpretation. This model of educational institutions teaching the four canonical schools of law became paradigmatic for some later Sunni dynasties. Judges from theological seminaries would adjudicate based on their education, and practices differed vastly across time and region. The extent to which any judgment had real-world efficacy depended on its enforcement and circulation as precedent. Thus, no single scholarly judgment can establish universal dogma, such as that implicit in the phrase 'image prohibition'.

With the advent of modernity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the introduction of modern educational systems and secular law interrupted and marginalized this system of juridical and theological authorization. On the one hand, this has enabled Orientalists and puritanical Islamists alike to directly cite originating texts without reflecting on their complex interpretive histories or potentially diverse legal rulings. On the other hand, this democratization has enabled modern scholars in the tradition of Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905), including Taha Hussein (1889–1973), Mohammad Arkoun (1928–2010), and Nasr Hamid Abu-Zaid (1943–2010), to argue that the Quran itself renders interpretation, a necessarily human and historical practice, incumbent on all Muslims. But

¹⁷ Hallaq, 1984; Berlekamp, 2011: 49–50.

is this possible? Or does reading depend so much on reception that our modern episteme occludes Quranic meaning?

Common wisdom often suggests that those curious about Islam should simply read the Quran. Yet the Quran is a famously difficult book. Whereas Norman Brown interprets it as a “radical thunderclap” that calls for a reevaluation of history akin to that of post-modernity, the nineteenth-century Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle condemned it as a “confused jumble, crude, incondite, endless iterations, long-windedness, entanglement; most crude, incondite; – insupportable stupidity, in short! ... one feels it difficult to see how any mortal could consider this Koran as a Book written in Heaven, too good for the Earth; as a well-written book, or indeed as a *book* at all.”¹⁸ Although apparently bigoted, this is precisely the reaction that Jalal al-Din Rumi would have expected from a novice attempting to read the Quran. He explains:

The Koran is like a bride. Although you pull the veil away from her face, she will not show herself to you. When you investigate the Koran, but receive no joy or unveiling, it is because your pulling at the veil has caused you to be rejected. The Koran has deceived you and shown itself to be ugly. It says, “I am not that beautiful bride.” It is able to show itself in any form it desires. But if you stop pulling at its veil and seek its good pleasure; if you water its field, serve it from afar, and strive in that which pleases it, then it will show you its face without any need for you to draw aside its veil.¹⁹

Rumi replaces the entitlement of reading with the union of collaborative engagement. The reader seeking mastery over the Quran fails intrinsically. The Quran is the agent of her own accessibility; reading her through the entitlement of the reader amounts to rape.

His thought reflects intrinsic approaches to Islam that foster spiritual union with the divine that had developed contemporaneously with jurisprudence. Often called ‘Sufism’ (*tasawwuf*), these practices trace their origins to the visionary nature of the Prophet Muhammad’s revelation. Early mystics, such as Rabi’a of Basra (718–801) and Mansur al-Hallaj (858–922), could be described as independent, wandering, mad, poetic sages. By the early twelfth century, however, when Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali (1058–1111), who taught at the Nizamiyya Madrasa, extolled intrinsic paths to wisdom in his *Alchemy of Happiness* (1105), Sufism had become mainstream. The elaborate cosmologies of Platonic Sufi thinkers such as Shahib al-Din Suhrawardi (1154–1191) and Muhyi al-Din ibn Arabi (1165–1240)

¹⁸ Brown, 1981: 55, 50. ¹⁹ Chittick, 1983: 273.

reverberated in the teachings of thirteenth-century sages, who often expressed their thought in poetry. The orders that developed in memory of these sages practice spiritual exercises through which to traverse the stations of the path to God. Many of these rituals incorporate practices of divine remembrance (*dhikr*) combining meditation, music, and bodily movement, known as audition (*sama*).

Membership in these orders was central to Muslim communal life, and often linked with guild participation. Associating them with those who obey God as described in the Quranic verse 4:69, even the conservative Hanbali scholar Taqi al-Din ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) recognized Sufism as

the science of realities and states of experience. The Sufi is that one who purifies himself from everything which distracts him from the remembrance of God. [The Sufi] is so filled with knowledge of the heart and knowledge of the mind that the value of gold and stones will be equal to him. Sufism safeguards the precious meanings and leaves behind the call to fame and vanity to reach the state of truthfulness.²⁰

Opposition to Sufism could be complex. For example, the historian ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) described Sufism as equivalent to the law in defining Islam.²¹ Yet he also issued a ruling (*fatwa*) condemning the writings of ibn Arabi, one of its germinal theorists.²²

The tension between legalism and mysticism predates Islam. Sufism reflects a Platonic approach of *eros* (*ishq*), while legalism espouses a doctrine parallel with *nomos*. Established through Pythagorean and Platonic thought, the idea of *eros* considers the soul as divine and therefore as the human internalization of God. Redemption occurs through return to the divine. In the *nomos* tradition, the soul is created along with the body, and does not have a preceding existence to which it can return.²³ The opposition also reverberates with Zoroastrian opposition between *getik*, the terrestrial, opaque, and heavy nature of creatures, and *menok*, the ethereal, transparent, and subtle one.²⁴ Thus the Hanbali scholar ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn al-Jawzi (1116–1201) derides Sufism:

Where is the association between the Creator and the created that can produce affection, love, or yearning? What relation is there between mud and water, and between the Creator of the heavens? ... God has no quality towards which human nature can incline or souls yearn. Rather, the complete dissimilarity between the

²⁰ Kabbani, 1995: 19. ²¹ Akkash, 2005a: 18. ²² Ahmad, 2000: 92–93.

²³ Bell, 1979: 201–202. ²⁴ Porter, 2000: 113.

Divinity and His creatures produce in men's souls awe and timidity. What the Sufi lovers maintain concerning God is pure delusion.²⁵

Yet far from peripheral to legalistic Islamic orthodoxy, membership in dervish orders was common to religious and legal scholars, guild members, and royalty.²⁶ The immense economic and spiritual power of Sufi shaykhs led at various times to political alliances with rulers, cooptation by rulers, and the outright prohibition of specific brotherhoods. Although at times condemned as heresy, many of these restrictions served political exigencies.

Even when officially marginalized, Sufi interpretations of the Quran and existential parables circulated in poetry. In the practice of *falsafa* (medieval Aristotelian philosophy), allegory provided a means of teaching non-initiates the hidden knowledge of gnosis readily misunderstood as heresy. In relation to his tales (*qisas*), ibn Sina suggested that hints and pointers (*rumuz wa-issarat*) could be used for purposes of instruction, but their nature as parables should not be revealed.²⁷ In one of his odes (*ghazal*), Jalal al-Din Rumi says, "All this is a symbol (*rumuz*) and its meaning is that yon world is always coming into the world (of this life)."²⁸ Sufi shaykh Ankaravi Ismail Rusuhi Efendi (d. 1631) explains the *mathnawi* poetic form, dominating Rumi's production, as intending meaning by way of symbol and allusion to signify subtlety and secrecy.²⁹

The segregation of Sufism as 'heterodox' in opposition to a presumed orthodoxy emerges only in the modern era.³⁰ Modern Sunni puritanical movements deny the legitimacy of lived historical Islam and retroactively assert that authenticity belongs only to the Islam of the first generation of Muslims after the life of the Prophet, a generation known as the *salaf*. Many of these movements rely on the thought of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1702–1792).³¹ His theology relied extensively on the thought of ibn Taymiyya, whose work had limited contemporary efficacy, as he wrote during house arrest in Damascus following the thirteenth-century Mongol invasions. Wahhabi thought redefines the doctrine of the oneness of God (*tawhid*) through strict adherence to social and institutional practices defining the community, focusing not on faith but on ritual practice. Failure to observe signs of practice is equated with repudiation (*kufr*) of truth and must be persecuted by just believers.³² Historical Islam becomes inauthentic as it fails to follow these primordial precepts. In contrast to ibn

²⁵ Bell, 1979: 24–25. ²⁶ Ahmed, 2015: 78. ²⁷ Stroumsa, 1992: 191–192.

²⁸ Bürgel, 1988: 16. ²⁹ Holbrook, 1994: 44. ³⁰ Ahmed, 2015: 92–97.

³¹ El-Rouayheb, 2010. ³² Haj, 2008: 36.

Taymiyya, his vehement opposition to all Sufi practices, Shi'ism, and the veneration of saints as innovation and idolatry led to the destruction of the Shi'a shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf in 1803 and the destruction of the historic al-Baqi Cemetery in Medina in 1806. This has served as a precedent for much of contemporary Islamic iconoclasm, such as that of the Taliban and that of the so-called Islamic State, which attacked Sufi and Shi'a shrines as well as monuments more important for Western observers.

The association of restrictive interpretation with orthodoxy conforms to the modern conflation of so-called progress with the growth of liberalism and secularism based on the history of Christianity in Europe. Yet neither the teleological movement from conservatism to liberalism nor the distinction between religion and secularity clearly pertains to the Islamic case. In premodern Islamic societies, perceptual culture partook of an intellectual culture steeped in faith, and often suffused with Sufism. The alignment of so-called orthodoxy with a neutral, objective, and properly academic understanding of religion ends up promoting an unacknowledged political identification of art with a secular space absented of faith: if orthodoxy excludes Sufism, and Sufism informs the arts, then Islamic art cannot be properly Islamic, and art reflects culture rather than religion. This perspective ends up confirming a Salafist position, excluding the lived history of Islam as expressed in perceptual culture and intellectual history from a purely theological Islam. As Edward Said suggests, "the general liberal consensus that 'true' knowledge is fundamentally nonpolitical ... obscures the highly if obscurely organized political circumstances obtaining when knowledge is produced."³³ While contemporary theologians can prescribe how they believe Muslims should be in the world, they cannot excommunicate the past. Neither can art historians.

1.2 Discourses of the Image in Islam

The persistent premise of an absolute Islamic image prohibition has led to extensive modern scholarship concerning the regulation of art through scripture.³⁴ Yet experience undermines this premise. Muslims do not use votive images, but the plethora of representational images of religious, fantastic, historical, scientific, and even pornographic subjects suggests a richer

³³ Said, 1978: 10.

³⁴ Arnold, 1928; Creswell, 1946; Paret, 1976/7; Flood, 2002; Watt, 2002; Naef, 2003; Ibric, 2006; Vilchez, 2017: 70–78.

relationship with the image than one based on permissibility.³⁵ The discourse of prohibition misapprehends the discursive structure of Islamic law and its wide range of expression in the varied histories and cultures of Islam. As Barry Flood points out, a “neat dichotomy” between theological norms as absolute or irrelevant occludes an “illuminating middle ground of compromise and negotiation.”³⁶ It cynically suggests that the plenitude of figural imagery in Islamic art contravened an established rule due to elitism or to cultural inauthenticity. It fails to recognize that prohibition does not emerge directly from scripture, but from implementation of its interpretation – and this was far from uniformly enforced.

The lived history of images in the Islamic world can be roughly periodized as: the era of the Prophet and the Rightly Guided Caliphs; the formative era under the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates; the era dominated by manuscript painting following the thirteenth-century Mongol invasions and the subsequent imperial dynasties with Persianate court cultures; and the modern era, incorporating Western hegemonic practices. In contrast to the heated ecclesiastical debates about the religious legitimacy of images that followed the Christianization of the Roman Empire, almost no discussion of the legitimacy of the image emerged in Islamic theological debates.³⁷

Historical sources documenting the transition to Islam in the Hijaz suggest that idolatry was understood not simply through representational verisimilitude, but through attribution of divinity through worship. According to reports two centuries after his death, Muhammad and his followers destroyed the traces of polytheistic practice in Mecca in 630, including the idols worshiped at the Kaaba by the Quraysh, the tribe of the Prophet. The sculptures that were destroyed may have included a red agate statue of Hubal, the primary male deity of Mecca, who guarded and guided the seven divination arrows that guided decision making within the clan.³⁸ The Kaaba also contained wall paintings depicting the prophets holding divining arrows, explicitly forbidden in the Quran. However, the image of Mary holding the baby Jesus in her lap (probably a portable icon depicting the Virgin Enthroned) located in the Kaaba was reported to have been spared. Rudi Paret’s discussion of the emergence of various Hadith suggests that the status of the image was subject to debate in the era of the prophet, yet the enforcement of such concerns was apparently inconsistent.³⁹ In sharp contrast, a *Hadith* related by the Prophet’s youngest wife A’isha bint Abi Bakr (614–678) indicates that he always destroyed objects

³⁵ For discussion of the religious image in Islam, see Gruber, 2009; Gruber and Shalem, 2014; Roxburgh, 2001. For discussion of erotic images, see Leoni and Natif, 2013.

³⁶ Hallaq, 2005; Flood, 2013. ³⁷ Elias, 2012. ³⁸ Faris, 1952: 23–24.

³⁹ King, 1985: 268; Paret, 1977: 162; Natif, 2011: 42.

in his home marked by a cross.⁴⁰ Although one commentator, the Yemeni Muhammad al-Shawkani (1759–1839), expanded this restriction of the cross to forbid all representations (*taswir*) on garments, curtains, or carpets, the *Hadith* point to doctrinal rather than representational concerns.⁴¹ Whereas the cross promotes the Crucifixion as the distinguishing doctrine between Islam and Christianity, the image of Virgin and Child reflects a shared doctrine of miraculous birth.

Although rare, periodic destruction of votive images did occur. During the Umayyad period, doctrinal concerns continued to render the display of the cross far more problematic than the representational imagery also avoided by contemporary iconoclastic Christians.⁴² However, the very same caliphs who patronized theologians and institutionalized the Islamic tradition incorporated sophisticated wall painting and sculpture in the decoration of their palaces, hunting lodges, and baths. The only legal prohibition of images during the early years of Islam occurred under the Umayyad caliph Yazid, when a 721 ban was implemented, lasting only until his death two-and-a-half years later. Even Roman Christian sources of the period found his action unusual enough to attribute his decision not to Islam, but to a Jewish sorcerer who promised him a long reign if he destroyed all the paintings in his realm.⁴³

The seizure of Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain icons in ninth-century Afghanistan and eleventh-century India reflects a culture in which destruction accompanied display, symbolizing conquest more than iconoclasm. For example, physician and chronicler Abu 'Ubayd al-Juzjani (d. 1060) relates that the *linga* of the Hindu temple of Somnath was destroyed under Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni (r. 998–1002), with parts laid at the entrance to his palace and mosque. Idols were also sent to Mecca and Medina, for display as well as public destruction. Not unique to idols, such destruction also befell Islamic texts promoting Shi'a or Mu'tazilite ideas.⁴⁴ Far from being universally sanctioned, Mahmud's destructive tendencies were disparaged by the scholar Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Biruni (973–1040 CE), who wrote an extensive treatise about India following his patron Mahmud's conquests, and regarded Hindu Brahmins as part of a social hierarchy distinguished not by religion, but by reason.⁴⁵

Discussion of images seems to have increased in concert with the introduction of manuscript illustration. The twelfth-century geographer Muhammad ibn Mahmud ibn Ahmad al-Tusi indicates ambivalence regarding the function of images in a preface to his discussion of the wonders of creation. He says: "Know that many images have been made

⁴⁰ Flood, 2002: 645; King, 1985: 270. ⁴¹ 'Isa, 1955: 252. ⁴² King, 1985; Fowden, 2004: 59.

⁴³ Vasiliev, 1956. ⁴⁴ Flood, 2009: 32–34. ⁴⁵ Kavuri-Bauer, 2018: 292.

on earth for the sake of admonition so that people may take heed of them ... Know that image-making is unlawful, but it affects the soul.”⁴⁶ His emphasis on utility over permissibility exemplifies a wide range of uses for visual images in diverse temporal and geographical Islamic cultures. The earliest surviving manuscript paintings include thirteenth-century illustrated volumes of the Arabic translation of *The Pharmacy* by Pedanius Dioscorides (40–90), *The Assemblies of al-Hariri* by al-Qasim al-Hariri of Basra (1054–1122), and copies of ibn Bakhtishu’s *The Usefulness of Animals* and *Kalila and Dimna*. In the fourteenth century, the ethnically Mongol Ilkhanid rulers funded the production and distribution of illustrated copies of books such as the *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) by Abu al-Qasim Firdausi (940–1020) and the *Compendium of Chronicles* by Rashid al-Din Hamadani (1247–1318) throughout their empire. Within its attempt at a full history of the world legitimating Ilkhanid sovereignty, the *Compendium* included an extensive illustrated history of the Abrahamic prophets, including the life of Muhammad. Often illustrated, a new literary genre (*mirajnamah*) emerged, emphasizing the visionary journey (*mir’aj*) establishing him in the lineage of Abrahamic prophets. As Christiane Gruber has shown, far from universally forbidden, paintings of the Prophet Muhammad and other prophets were widespread, shifting over time from figural to more conceptual modes of representation.⁴⁷ In the fifteenth century, the ethnically Mongol–Turkic, linguistically Persianate Timurid courts of Central Asia patronized poetry and painting, producing lavish books that complemented extensive wall painting. Perpetuating this legacy, early modern imperial dynasties including the Ottomans, the Mughals, and the Safavids retained and further developed the visual culture that had emerged in previous eras. These traditions faded with the printing press and the introduction of modern methods of producing images (such as lithography and photography), as well as the adoption of Western artistic practices, such as representational oil painting.

Although Islamic thinkers periodically objected to the use of images, others found their destruction no less inappropriate. Images were destroyed not only through iconoclasm, but also through rubbing and kissing from physical devotion to portions of a sacred image.⁴⁸ In later centuries, image destruction did not constitute a cultural norm, but occurred in discrete events disempowering the image.⁴⁹ Even where images were legally limited, social practices, including drinking and sexuality, rarely adhere to the stringent ideals set out by religious scholars, so

⁴⁶ Pancaroğlu, 2003: 33. ⁴⁷ Gruber, 2009. ⁴⁸ Gruber, 2017. ⁴⁹ Flood, 2002.

there is no reason to assume that a dogmatic norm predominated over lived visual culture.⁵⁰

The modernist theologian Muhammad ‘Isa’s 1955 discussion of the image exemplifies the method of reasoning through which legal judgments remain open to reconsideration. By staging a discussion between jurists, he engages the reader in a processual rather than static relationship with Islam. He argues that far from demonstrating prohibition, the relative rarity of rulings concerning images in the vast sea of Islamic jurisprudence suggests overarching lack of interest:

The subject of *taswir* [representation] is one which is not often dealt with in ... Islamic jurisprudence ... I believe that Islam neglected this subject as unimportant. All that exist are a few *Hadiths* which Muslim jurisconsults have used by way of explanation or comment in forbidding, disapproving, or permitting the making of representations (of living creatures), or acquiring or looking at them ... No one can say that the Quran has either explicitly or implicitly provided for the prohibition of *taswir* ... If the question of *taswir* had been as important as other problems, such as those of strong drink, marriage, divorce and inheritance, the Quran certainly would have dealt with it explicitly, as it did with other problems of conduct and worship.⁵¹

‘Isa underscores the fact that Quranic quotations and *Hadith* emerge as law through the disputation of previous interpreters. Rather than viewing their arguments additively, ‘Isa argues in relation to these commentators using procedures of precedent (*taqlid*) and reason (*ijtihad*) as called for in the procedures of Islamic jurisprudence. He thus conceives of himself as partaking in a debate among commentators from any temporal or geographical context, ancient or modern.

Conversely, when scholars cite the Quran or *Hadith* as a direct source for a presumed ban on the image without recognizing this process, we construct a normative Islam distinct from its historical evolution – in effect, we become secular arbiters of Islamic dogma rejecting the lived diversity of practice. Through this process, the secular scholarly premise of a universal image prohibition has ironically become a defining feature of Islam for many contemporary Muslims.

The absolutism of an image prohibition emerges more from modern scholarship than from Islamic law. ‘Isa points out that only Orientalist scholars have used the following Quranic verse as instigating an image prohibition: “You who believe, intoxicants and gambling, idolatrous practices (*ansab*) and [divining with] arrows are repugnant acts – Satan’s doing – shun them so you may

⁵⁰ Rabbat, 2006: 103. ⁵¹ ‘Isa, 1955: 252.

prosper” (Q5:90).⁵² Modern scholars often cite a familiar set of *Hadith* as demonstrating the image prohibition. Yet without legal citation and use, *Hadith* alone cannot demonstrate law.

What these *Hadith* do provide is insight into how early Muslims thought about images. Bukhari writes that A’isha said that the Prophet said: “The image-makers will be punished on the Day of Resurrection and will be told, ‘Give life to that which you have created’” (Hadith 2151).⁵³ Bukhari also relates that the Prophet decreed: “Those who will be most severely tormented on the Day of Resurrection are those who make representations.” The ninth-century commentator Abu Jafar Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (839–929) understood this to refer to objects that “one consciously worships instead of God, which makes one an unbeliever.”⁵⁴ Thus a sign or image of an object without the breath of life (*ruh*) cannot in any case be embodied, and is therefore sanctioned; a sign of an object with *ruh* can only be sanctioned if it clearly cannot be embodied. Abu ‘Ali al-Farisi (d. 987) confined the restriction to the representation of God in corporeal form. The commentator Zamakshari (d. 1144) offered a concrete solution by proposing to cut the head from the body by drawing a line across the neck of a figure.⁵⁵ Similarly, in his widely read treatise *Ihya al-Ulum* (Revival of the Religious Sciences), Abu Hamid al-Ghazali emphasizes restriction on three-dimensional objects imitating the form of animals, and explicitly pronounces images on objects such as textiles and bowls, licit.⁵⁶ He does not mention wall paintings, which did exist in his era – he uses them as a metaphor, as discussed in Chapter 5 – or manuscript paintings, which seem to have been a later development. ‘Isa points out that this interpretation entered Islamic juridical discourse in the *Riyadh al-Salihin* of the commentator Abu Zakariya Yahya ibn Sharaf al-Nawawi (1234–1278). Writing during the tension following the Mongol invasions, he wrote:

The authorities of our school and others hold that the making of a picture of any living thing is strictly forbidden and that it is one of the great sins because it is specifically threatened with the grievous punishment mentioned in the Hadith ... the crafting of it is forbidden under every circumstance, because it imitates the creative activity of God.⁵⁷

⁵² Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 76.

⁵³ www.aHadith.com offers searchable *Hadith* in English, last accessed September 27, 2016. The similarity between this statement and the biblical book of Isaiah 44, extensively debated during the Eastern Roman iconoclastic controversy, underscores the cultural overlap.

⁵⁴ ‘Isa, 1955: 254. ⁵⁵ Natif, 2011: 49; Vilchez, 2017: 76. ⁵⁶ Graves, 2018: 61.

⁵⁷ Ahmed, 2015: 49–50.

Shahab Ahmed argues for the normativity of this ruling based on its own assertion of comprising earlier opinions. Yet if it had become normative, the Shafi'i scholar from Cairo, Taj al-Din al-Subki (d. 1370) might not have needed to repeat it, saying that "the painter should not paint animals on a wall, nor on the ceiling, nor on an object, nor on the floor."⁵⁸

Conversely, al-Nawawi's contemporary ibn Taymiyya, vehemently against the veneration of saints, said little concerning images. The compilation of his judgments (*Majmu al-Fatawa*) relates that he commanded the destruction of "two types of images: images which represent the deceased person, and images which are placed on top of graves – because *shirk* (the ultimate sin of placing another in the place of God) may come about from both types."⁵⁹ Even the modern Salafi scholar Sayyid Sabiq, an ardent follower of ibn Taymiyya, points out that if images were unlawful, the Prophet would have explicitly forbidden them.⁶⁰ Like al-Nawawi, he addresses the affectivity of the image in the viewer at particular sites where the image might induce ancestor worship, and not a general prohibition of the image.

Another frequently cited *Hadith* advocates restraint from images because of association with other unclean things. Al-Bukhari relates that 'Ali ibn Abi Talib said that the Prophet said: "The angels do not enter a house where there is an image, a dog, or a Junab person" (Hadith 262).⁶¹ 'Isa points out that the early Quranic commentator al-Tabari (839–929) qualified the interpretation of this *Hadith* as referring to images "that one consciously worships instead of God, which makes one an unbeliever."⁶² In yet another frequently cited *Hadith*, Bukhari relates that 'A'isha said that she hung a curtain decorated with pictures of animates on a cupboard. The Prophet tore that curtain and she turned it into two pillows for her to sit on" (Hadith 669). 'Isa points out that al-Ayni (1360–1453), who served as chief judge in Cairo in 1426–1429, situated it within polytheistic contexts.⁶³ Similarly, a twentieth-century judgment by Muhammad Abduh, who served as the *shaykh al-islam* (official leading religious scholar) of Cairo between 1900 and his death in 1905, points out that in the absence of the obstacles of pure pleasure and polytheism,

the representation of persons assumes the same status as the representation of plants and trees. You must not adduce the verdict that a representation, under all circumstances, is liable to be worshipped; for I think that one could say to you that

⁵⁸ Vilchez, 2017: 76–77. ⁵⁹ Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu al-Fataawaa*, 17/462.

⁶⁰ Kabbani, 1995: xxx. ⁶¹ The meaning of *junab* is unknown. ⁶² 'Isa, 1955: 254.

⁶³ 'Isa, 1955: 255.

your tongue also is liable to tell lies, but is it necessary to tie it up even though it may tell the truth as well as falsehood? I am convinced, in short, that Islamic law would never prohibit one of the most useful means to knowledge if it were certain that it contained no danger to religion, faith, or action.⁶⁴

The Islamic concern with images pervading these sources differs from the explicit biblical bans on representation, where God enjoins his followers: “Do not make idols or set up an image or a sacred stone for yourselves, and do not place a carved stone in your land to bow down before it” (Leviticus 26:1); “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them” (Exodus 20:4–6). Islamic sources do not mention the image except as a distraction from prayer (as in the case of the curtains); defilement (the angels not entering the house, as well as associations with forbidden practices such as the paying for blood, usury, and tattooing in Hadith 299); and, most importantly, of attributing to man the creative function reserved for God – sinful not as idolatry but as *shirk*.

These *Hadith* never address the image so much as its recipient. They express a concern about misapprehension more than regulation of representation. In contrast to the clear Abrahamic injunctions against idols, these *Hadith* offer norms helping the believer to focus on the unseen divine rather than on potentially distracting representations.

1.3 Image Desecration

Assertions of an Islamic image prohibition have often been mixed with assertions of iconoclasm, the social imperative to destroy images. Yet image desecration has not only been relatively rare, it was generally politically rather than theologically motivated. Soon after Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni’s destruction of the temple of Somnath, some historians and poets glorified him by comparing his act to the Prophet’s destruction of the idols of the Kaaba.⁶⁵ A sixteenth-century Mughal manuscript painting uses images of contemporary Indian statuary to represent the destruction of idols at the time of the birth of Muhammad, described apocryphally in the *Hamzanamah*, a sixteenth-century work commissioned by the Emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605). Yet in doing so, it does not eschew figural representation of either the idols or the people whose images

⁶⁴ Isa, 1955: 264. ⁶⁵ Flood, 2009; Homerin, 1983.

were iconoclastically rubbed out only in the nineteenth century [Plate 1]. In 1839, colonial British administrators adopted the legend, justifying their sovereignty in India by framing the desecration of Hindu idols at Somnath as delegitimizing imperial Muslim rule.⁶⁶ This historiography has contributed to anti-Muslim sentiment modern India.

Similarly unrelated to jurisprudence, the image of the Prophet's iconoclasm at the Kaaba entered popular Islamic culture through Moustapha Akkad's 1976 film *al-Risala/The Message*, which effectively places the viewer in the subject position of the Prophet in an effort to avoid worship of the actor as his iconic representation. The film dramatizes the Prophet Muhammad's destruction of the idols in the Kaaba as symbolic of the victory of Islam over paganism. Popular modern filmic iconography thus ties the inception of the religion to a visual trope never used in Islamic law as a justification for aniconism. Probably intended as a non-violent dramatic climax symbolizing the Prophet's leadership, the film effectively constructs a contemporary iconography of iconoclasm.

This iconography reemerged when the so-called Islamic State in Syria released a video recording the destruction of the Mosul Museum in 2015. A Quranic recitation from Sura 21:58 including the phrase "he reduced them to fragments" floats over an interior scene of men taking sledgehammers to antiquities. To a score of religious chants accompanied by war cries, a text on the screen explains, "These idols and statues were not visible in the days of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions but were extracted by the worshippers of devils."⁶⁷ Although the cited Quranic passage apparently references the Prophet Muhammad's iconoclasm, it actually recounts the resistance to Abraham against his father's worship of and trade in idols. Such conflation of the prophets Muhammad and Abraham frequently functions in Islamic culture as proof of prophecy. It parallels several earlier retellings: in the Jewish Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 38:13; in the biblical book of Deuteronomy 12:3, enjoining the people of Moses to smash idols as they enter Jordan; and in the biblical book of Micah 5, which describes the entry into Nimrod and the subsequent destruction of Assyrian idols. Ironically, the video reflects an Orientalist vision of Islamic iconoclasm rooted firmly in the biblical tradition.

Yet the Kaaba represents a transition to Islam separate from those roots. Although it lies at the center of all Islamic prayer, its symbolism is rarely elucidated. It is an empty building draped with the *kiswa*, a heavy gold-and-velvet brocade covering embroidered with Quranic verse. Surrounded

⁶⁶ Burnes, 1839. ⁶⁷ Shaw, 2015.

by a silver frame uniting its fragments, the Black Stone (believed to be a meteorite) in its wall serves as the nexus of worshipful circumambulation during pilgrimage. The building is not entered during worship. What, then, makes it the nexus of Islamic prayer? How does its aniconicity (absence of the image) engage with a premise of Islamic iconoclasm (prohibition of the image)?

In his *Book of Idols*, the Baghdadi scholar Hisham ibn al-Kalbi (737–819) describes the Kaaba in the context of a need for religious renewal satisfied by the Quranic revelation. He explains that God commanded Abraham to establish the Kaaba as the first house of worship. Visitors to Mecca would thereafter carry away a stone of the Sacred House (*al-haram*) as a token of reverence, and subsequently circumambulate the Stone as a symbol of the Kaaba. This act of circumambulation needed an object at its center, rendering aniconic stones functionally interchangeable with statues of deities: “Whenever a traveler stopped at a place or station in order to rest or spend the night, he would select for himself four stones, pick out the finest among them and adopt it as his god, and use the remaining three as supports for his cooking-pot.”⁶⁸ While al-Kalbi seems to ridicule such arbitrary attribution of sacrality, it suggests a polytheism relying less on visual representation than on objects conjuring divine presence through worship.

This worship of stones made Christians condemn Islam as idolatrous. Thus both Patriarch Germanus of Constantinople (r. 715–730) and John of Damascus (650–754) describe Muslims as venerating an inanimate stone in the desert which John of Damascus claimed was believed to represent the head of Aphrodite. Bukhari relates that the second caliph, ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab (r. 634–644), said, “I know that thou art a stone, without power to harm or to help, and had I not seen the Messenger of God kiss thee, I would not kiss thee.”⁶⁹

The narrative of the Stone condenses the teleology of Islam. The Stone is believed to have fallen from heaven to instruct Adam and Eve where to put their first altar to God after their fall. Forgotten before the flood, the Stone was rediscovered by Abraham, who incorporated it into a temple. The Quraysh tribe protected the temple and reconstructed it after a flood in 602. Biographies of the Prophet relate that various tribes cooperated until the symbolic act of placing the meteoric Black Stone. A respected elder called a halt to the fighting, suggesting that the first person to enter the sanctuary would solve the problem. The young Muhammad entered, and

⁶⁸ Faris, 1952: 28. ⁶⁹ Quoted in Vasiliev, 1956: 27.



Figure 1 Anonymous, *Muhammad at the Kaaba*, from *The Compendium of Chronicles* by Rashid al-Din Hamadani, c.1306/1315 CE. Edinburgh University Library, Or. MS 20, f. 45r, detail, c. 4 × 25 cm (p. 41.5 × 34.2 cm) Creative Commons

proposed that the Stone be raised on a mantle lifted collectively by all the tribes. A 1315 illustration from the *Compendium of Chronicles* underscores the key moment in the text, when the future Prophet lifts the Stone and places it as a cornerstone in the sanctuary, foreshadowing his rededication of the site in the name of Islam several decades later. [Figure 1]

This mode of memorial representation also informs the spatial structure of mosques. A mosque has no architectural requirement beyond directionality (*qibla*) toward the Kaaba. This is often indicated by a niche in the frontal wall of a prayer space called a mihrab, indicating leadership taken by the imam in front of the *qibla* niche before the congregation, and, by anachronistic extension, by the Prophet at the mosque of Medina.⁷⁰ In late antiquity, such a niche would have held a devotional sculpture. The absence of such a sculpture signals both the Prophet who hovers before it as the leader of Islam and the idea of the distant Kaaba to which it points. Just as an image indicates reality across a representational picture plane, the mihrab signals Prophetic guidance toward the Kaaba. The replacement of a devotional image with a devotional absence redirects prayer inward,

⁷⁰ Khoury, 1998.

toward God located as close to the believer as her jugular vein (Q50:16). Rather than indicating prohibition, the absent image signifies a conflation of signifier and signified communicating directly from the votive object into the devoted believer.

This implicit understanding of representation reflects participation in late antique discourses of mimesis largely excluded from modern aesthetic theory. Mimetic representation suggests a family of concepts of representation using any intermediary – words, sounds, physical images – to signify and communicate hypothesized realities. As these realities are “imagined possibilities of experience,” the Greek tradition emphasizes the effects of mimetic artworks on their viewers or hearers, and frequently “characterizes and evaluates the kinds of recognition, understanding, emotional response and evaluation that such artworks can or should elicit in their audiences.”⁷¹ Stephen Halliwell suggests that

The history of mimesis is the record of a set of debates that form themselves around a polarity between two ways of thinking about representational art. The first of these places central emphasis on the “outward-looking” relationship between the artistic work or performance and reality (“nature,” as it is often though problematically termed in the mimeticist tradition), whereas the other gives priority to the internal organization and fictive properties of the mimetic object or act itself ... encapsulating a difference between a “world-reflecting” model (for which the “mirror” has been a common though far from straightforward metaphorical emblem), and, on the other side, a “world-simulating” or “world-creating” conception of artistic representation.⁷²

Heidegger captures this sensibility in describing the “Greek man” as “the one who apprehends (*vernehmer*) that which is, and this is why in the age of the Greeks, the world cannot become picture.”⁷³

Modern considerations of Islamic painting recognize the ‘outward-looking’ aspect of mimesis – how we as agents apprehend the world. As in late antiquity, Islamic commentators and theorists focused largely on an ‘inward-looking’ aspect – how the world as agent enters human subjectivity. The philosopher al-Farabi (c.872–950) indicates this preference in saying, “Many people believe that the imitation of something in the most indirect form is preferable to direct imitation, and they hold the creator of those expressions to be the author of a more genuine form of imitation, as well as more skilled and experienced in the art.”⁷⁴ The image that early Islamic thinkers consider is not a

⁷¹ Halliwell, 2002: 16–19. ⁷² Halliwell, 2002: 23. ⁷³ Heidegger, 1977: 131.

⁷⁴ Vilchez, 2017: 282; Graves, 2018: 139.

means of showing so much as internalizing the real. The first author of Islamic parables, ibn Sina defends the mimetic effect of poetry as a means of formulating images in the imagination.

People respond to imagination (*tahyil*) more easily than to verification (*tasdiq*) ... because truth that is already known is like old merchandise, which has no freshness to it; and one cannot relate to truth that is as yet unknown. So if a true saying is phrased in an unusual way, and is associated with something that is agreeable to the soul, then it may impart both verification and imagination.⁷⁵

Similarly, in his commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, the Cordoban philosopher ibn Rushd (1126–1198) echoes a Platonic recognition of representation not as external but internal to its creator, saying, "Art is nothing but the form of the thing produced by art, and this form resides in the soul of the artist; it is this idea which is the principle for the form produced by art in the matter."⁷⁶

The relationship between the Islamic and late antique worlds remains insufficiently analyzed. Historiographic emphasis on the so-called closure of the doors of interpretation in the eleventh century corroborated the premise that the Islamic world functioned as a transparent vessel preserving antique texts for their revival through scholastic translation beginning in twelfth-century Europe. One response to this has been to assert purely Arab origins for Islamic practices.⁷⁷ Yet the Arab world of early Islam was integral to the world of late antiquity even before Islam's northward spread. As the seeds of faith spread geographically, Islam developed through interactions with local societies, whose scholars engaged with philosophy. Ideas do not remain tied to boundaries of ethnicity or religion. The relevance of late antique mimetic norms in Islamic discourses does not imply that Islamic culture was derivative or unoriginal, but rather that Islam emerged in an integral relationship with its environments.

As participants in late antique culture and avid readers of ancient Greek philosophy, Islamic thinkers developed understandings of perceptual culture that favored inward over outward mimesis. Discussed in the next four chapters, this understanding permeates discussions of music; the perception and ontology of the Quran; the mirror as the imaging surface of the heart; and the role of transient images in dreams and legends.

⁷⁵ Stroumsa, 1992: 199. ⁷⁶ Porter, 2000: 113.

⁷⁷ Khoury, 1993; Vilchez, 2017: 51 n. 74 critiques Mohammad Arkoun's comparison between Qahir al-Jurjani's analysis of Quranic rhetoric and Aristotelian rhetoric, suggesting that Quranic rhetoric can be entirely derived from Arab sources. I would suggest that these are not necessarily opposed so much as reflecting longstanding transcultural communication accompanying trade.

The centrality of music in early Islamic discourses contrasts with the marginality of images. Music's proponents and detractors both described it through a cosmology of similitudes, ranging from our internal experience to the physical world, the universe, and the divine. Its therapeutic, spiritual, sinful, divine, rational, and irrational effects exceed the physical experience of audition. The symbolic role that the modern episteme assigns to the outward, visual image may have been addressed by inward musical apprehension in the Islamic realm. Yet music lies in the blind spot of art-historical oculo-centrism.

This chapter explores premodern Islamic discussions of music to trace their inheritance of antique understandings of mimesis. First, it examines the discussions of legality of music – of the type one might have imagined pertaining to the image if it had been of similar concern. Guilty by association with disapproved practices such as drinking and fornication, music was nonetheless recognized as intimately spiritual. It then explores the production of musical meaning between the worldly and the divine.

2.1 The Legality of Music

Discussions concerning the permissibility of music began in ninth-century Baghdad, contemporaneous with the compilation of the *Hadith*. Its cultural centrality reflected the Islamic inheritance from both the antique and Arab traditions.

The first great Islamic philosopher, Abu Yusuf Yaqub ibn Ishaq al-Kindi (801–866), conceived of hearing as more reliable than sight because of the propensity to recognize correct rhythm and melody compared with the fallible judgment of distance, motion, and form.¹ He distinguished between theory (*musiqi*) and performance (*ghina*). Building on recently translated ancient Greek aphorisms concerning medicine, he considered *musiqi* as representing a cosmology in which the strings of an instrument

¹ Wright, 2004: 361.

and the musical modes played with them represented the temperaments and humors of the body, the four elements, the planets, and the zodiac.² Contrary to Aristotle's argument against the music of the spheres, al-Kindi adopted the Pythagorean and Platonic theories of celestial harmonies. Correlating pitch and the length of a plucked string, Pythagoras had associated the mathematical proportions of notes and string lengths with the sound he imagined created by planetary movement. Plato referenced this in the *Republic*, saying: "It is probable that as the eyes are fixed on astronomy, so the ears are fixed on harmonic movement, and these two kinds of knowledge are in a way akin, as the Pythagoreans say."³

Stopping short of understanding arithmetic as the universal principle, al-Kindi describes a universe stacked with theoretically significant similitudes through which the philosopher recognizes the affective realm of music.

The *falak* is the proximate efficient cause of change in the sensible world. It affects the seasons, generation and corruption, the distribution and the combining of hot–cold, dry–moist. The last are related to the four elements: fire – hot and dry; air – warm and moist; water – cold and moist; earth – cold and dry. In so far as the celestial sphere affects the epochs and seasons which in turn affect the character and mores of peoples.⁴

He understood musical therapy as selecting notes to realign bodily humors with celestial patterns. He associated the three emotional ranges of joy, sorrow, and impetuosity with specific rhythmical cycles.⁵ Although later authors described different iconographies of sound, all recognized music through cosmological similitude.⁶ By the sixteenth century, medical properties were attributed to particular modes used in art music. For example, *rast* aided hemiplegia, while *'iraq* aided humoral disorders such as brain diseases, vertigo, pleurisy, and suffocation. Mental hospitals continued to use choirs and musicians as a regular part of treatment much later, in Ottoman Cairo and Edirne.⁷

Stories about the semi-legendary musician Abu al-Hasan 'Ali ibn Nafi (759–857), nicknamed Ziryab, reflect this association between music and the humors.⁸ Of partial African descent (perhaps a freed slave), he performed at the court of the fourth Abbasid caliph, Harun al-Rashid (r. 789–857) in Baghdad. His education included astronomy, botanics, cuisine, and fashion. Migrating to the Umayyad court in Cordoba around 813, he

² Shiloah, 2007: 78. ³ Quoted in Walbridge, 2000: 68. ⁴ Shehadi, 1995: 26.

⁵ Wright, 2010: 83 n. 28. ⁶ Shehadi, 1995: 20–26. ⁷ Shiloah, 2007: 73, 75.

⁸ Shannon, 2015: 38–39.

gained renown elevating Andalusian court culture. He also improved the oud by making its body lighter, adding a fifth pair of strings, and replacing the wooden pick with an eagle's beak or quill. The strings of his oud were dyed colors according with the Aristotelian humors: the fourth (of lion gut) was black, symbolizing melancholy; the third (of lion gut) was white, for phlegm; the second red, for blood; and the highest in pitch, yellow, for bile. The second red string, added in the middle, represented the soul. Similar associations were recorded in the early twentieth century, associating the low-pitched (*bamm*) string with old age, water, winter, and night, and the highest-pitched pair (*zir*) with courage, fire, attractiveness, and pride.⁹

Offering both practical and theoretical information on music, al-Farabi also organizes his *Great Book of Music* through similitudes. He writes: "The sides of the square and the segment of a circle serve as the measuring instrument in architecture ... analogous to the syllogism in logic, the strophe in poetry."¹⁰ Discussing stringed and wind instruments, he outlines an auditory iconography. The most basic music, popular song, induces pleasure. Yet this should not be disparaged. Like Aristotle, he believes that serious things enabling supreme happiness also cause fatigue. Amusement remedies through relaxation, enabling a return to serious things.¹¹ Like poetry, complex music evokes images in the mind. Ultimately, music enables an affective dimension beyond language expressing delight, sadness, fear, or anger in humans and animals alike, due to their possession of a similar soul.¹² Al-Hujwiri similarly recites music's effects on animals – the delight of camels and asses when their drivers sing; practices of trapping deer for the hunt by beating on a basin of brass or tinkling bells; and how babies become intelligent sleeping to lullabies.¹³

Al-Farabi uses visual images as paradigms for musical iconography. He says:

There is a category that [in addition to pleasure and relaxation] provides the soul with imaginings (*takhayyulat*), deposits within the soul visualizations (*tasawwurat*) of things and inscribes the soul with matters it imitates. The effect of these melodies is comparable to that of adornments and images perceptible to the eye: for there are some that offer merely a delightful view and there are others which ... [also] imitate the disposition of things, their emotions, their actions, their morals, and their characters, along the lines of the ancient images that the masses, in times past, used to venerate as if they were embodiments of the gods that they were worshipping.¹⁴

⁹ Grame, 1972. ¹⁰ Porter, 2000: 111. ¹¹ Klein, 1966: 193. ¹² Shehadi, 1995: 63.

¹³ al-Hujwiri, 1959: 400. ¹⁴ al-Farabi, 1930, vol. I: 13.

For al-Farabi, the image does not represent an absent reality. Rather, the aesthetic work – visual or musical – deposits its image in the apprehending soul. The imagination creates melodies, performed or latent, depending on the practiced readiness of the artist.¹⁵ Like ibn Rushd, he describes an image internal to the artist emerging through performance. Such an image can either simply induce pleasure or, in embodying the ‘disposition of things,’ instigate worship in a manner analogous to, but crucially distinct from, idolatry. After all, without an object, there is nothing to idolize. For him, the matter of music is irrelevant beside the actual object of study, the divine, which could come as well from other substrates – nature, art, arithmetic, or geometry:

Musical theory generally aims to study the musical being that could also be a product of nature or a product of art. The theoretician does not have to worry if the musical being comes from nature or art. Just as in arithmetic and geometry, the beings that form scientific objects of study are natural or artistic products, but the cause of their existence is of little matter to the scientist.¹⁶

His conflation of media combines Plotonian immaterialism with the Aristotelian idea of music as affective (inward) image – perhaps reflecting al-Kindi’s translation of a book including paraphrases of Plotinus’s *Enneads* as “The Theology of Aristotle.”¹⁷ For Aristotle, musical mimesis functions as

an intrinsic capacity of musically organized sound to present and convey (affective) aspects of character; the patterns of music have properties ‘like’ the emotional states that can, for that reason, be the objects of their mimesis. As evidence for this view Aristotle cites music’s power to put its audiences into states of mind or feeling that contain, or are characterized by, these same emotions, so that musical mimesis seems to be a case that covers what might now be distinguished, by some philosophers, as representation and expression ... mimesis registers itself in its directness of effect upon listeners: “our souls are changed.”¹⁸

An apocryphal anecdote related by al-Farabi’s biographers underscores such musical affectivity. It relates that the elderly al-Farabi visited the court of the Shi’a ruler Sayf al-Dawla (r. 945–967). When he arrived at the court, the ruler was sitting with religious scholars (*‘ulama*). He said to al-Farabi,

¹⁵ Klein, 1966: 181–182. ¹⁶ al-Farabi, 1930, vol. I: 28.

¹⁷ Fowden, 2015: 158; Berlekamp, 2011: 16.

¹⁸ Halliwell, 2002: 159–160. For the translation of Aristotelian notions of mimesis into Islamic discourses, see Vilchez, 2017: 285–300.

“Would you like to eat?”

Al Farabi said, “No.”

So he said to him, “Would you like to drink?”

Al-Farabi said, “No.”

So he said to him, would you like to listen [to some music]?”

Al-Farabi said, “Yes.”

So Sayf al-Dawla gave orders for the singers to be brought in and each expert in this art came in with a variety of musical instruments. But each time one of them played on his instrument, al-Farabi found fault with him, saying, “You have made a mistake!”

Then Sayf al-Dawla said to him, “have you any proficiency in this art?”

Al Farabi said, “Yes.”

He then drew from his waist a leather bag, opened it, and drew from it some reeds, which he put together. Then he played on them, whereupon all who were at the *majlis* laughed. Then he took them to pieces and put them together another way, and when he played on them, everyone in the *majlis* cried. Then he took them to pieces [yet] again, put them together differently, played on them and everyone in the *majlis*, even the doorkeeper, fell asleep. And al-Farabi went out.¹⁹

The mythologized al-Farabi plays the soul through the vehicle of the flute.

Such emotion as an attribute of music occurs in the thirteenth-century *Stories of Bayad and Riyad*, a rare Andalusian illustrated manuscript that survived an edict by Cardinal Ximenes de Cisneros (1436–1517) to destroy books with Arabic writing lest they be the Quran²⁰ [Figure 2]. In an enclosed garden lush with flowering vegetation, a lady asks one of her slave-girls to sing. A young man, Bayad, already smitten with one of the slave-girls, uses the festivities as a pretext to discover if his beloved Riyad, a slave-girl, is as beautiful as he imagines. He takes the lute and begins to play, eventually confessing of his love to the lady, who is served wine as she listens. The scene becomes an exchange of twenty-five love songs between the pair – yet the lady cannot unite them since her father, the owner of Riyad, wants her.²¹ The rhythmic order of the painting echoes the poetic imagery conflating love, nature, wine, and music. Far from inciting debauchery, the wine enhances the musical romance. While the scene is more carnal than transcendent, the affiliation of romance

¹⁹ This tale is related by Bayhaqi (d. 1169) and ibn Khallikan (d. 1282). See Netton, 1992: 6.

²⁰ Garcia-Arenal, 2009. ²¹ Ruggles, 2018: 28.



Figure 2 Anonymous, *Bayad Plays the Oud to the Lady*, from the *Story of Bayad and Riyad*, Vatican Apostolic Library, Vat.ar.368, 10r, 17.5 × 19 cm. By permission of Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, with all rights reserved. © 2019 Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana

with verdant, perfumed nature suggests romance as more heavenly than dangerous, perhaps because it exists in the imaginary realm.

Writing of the Mughal era, Kavita Singh suggests that normally the position at the right of the page, where Arabic script begins, features the ruler. Here, the musician takes this place of honor, implying an inversion of medium and audience. The music becomes an agent that conjures its listeners into being, much as the story in which the figures occur are

conjured through the agency of words. Such conjuring functions within the tradition of *wasf*, which both reflected and transformed. As described by the literary theorist ibn Rashiq al-Qairawani (d. 1065), *wasf* “enabled those who listened to a poetic recital to envision the object described; thus the literal act of hearing (*sam*) would be transformed into the imaginative act of seeing or vision.”²²

A similar device appears in an eighteenth-century scene of lovers listening to music, depicted by the Mughal artist Mir Kalan Khan [Plate 2]. As Singh elucidates, depiction of the musician through Hindu conventions contrasts that of the lovers depicted in a Persian mode developed by the artist Riza Abbasi (1570–1635), underscoring music as transcending cultural and spatial boundaries, indicated by the river between musician and audience.²³ The music not only conjures lovers, but also the union of lover and beloved, believer and divine, constituting theophany. Music transcends the apparent distinction between worldly cultures, religions, and borders, by intoxicating with metaphysical union. The birds in the tree, the ducks in the water, and the squirrels frolicking in the foreground underscore the similitude of the human and the animal soul. Despite separation across centuries and geographies, the confluence of these Andalusian and Mughal depictions of audition suggest a shared understanding of how music and narrative both engage their audiences. More than simply shared origins or scriptures, such confluence indicates the discursive cohesion of Islam across vast temporal and physical distances.

One source for this continuity may be widely circulated texts that included music among the principles of Islamic spirituality. The semi-secret, anonymous society called the Brethren of Purity (Ikhwan al-Safa) indicated the importance of music to understanding the divine in the world by devoting the fifth of their fifty-two epistles to it. According to the *Book of Pleasure and Conviviality* by Abu Hayyam al-Tawhidi (930–1023), the Brethren were the senior companions of a Buyid officer in tenth-century Basra. Later, Isma’ili missionaries claimed that their early Imams wrote and secretly disseminated the epistles in mosques under the second Abbasid caliph, al-Ma’mun (r. 813–833). The authorship remains undetermined.²⁴ The frontispiece of a 1287 manuscript from Baghdad suggests a convivial environment framed similarly as the contemporary architectural depictions in *The Story of Bayad and Riyad* [Plate 3]. The two-page frontispiece depicts scholars deep in conversation. One of the sages lies down, suggestive of the Greek symposium. A young man transcribes

²² Bush, 2018: 88. ²³ Singh, 2017: 4–5. ²⁴ El-Bizri, 2008.

the words of one of the sages. Figures seated on the upper register read books, presumably as future students of a living past. The image frames the epistles in a relationship between speech and writing in which text serves as an edifice capable of traversing time.²⁵

The fifth epistle transforms earlier cosmological concerns into theological ones, indicating that musical mimesis conditions a recipient to engage the divine. The epistle taxonomizes sound, particularly music, as a mimetic language that is directly spiritual because its expression obviates the use of matter.

In every manual craft the matter dealt with consists of naturally occurring material, and that all its products are physical forms. The exception is music, for the ‘matter’ it deals with consists entirely of spiritual substances, namely, the souls of those who listen to it. The effects it has on them are also entirely spiritual, for melodies, consisting of rhythms and tones, have effects on the soul analogous to the effects of the art of those who work with the particular material associated with their crafts.²⁶

For the Brethren, this inward mimetic capacity served as a trans-religious vehicle of worship.

With regard to the use of music by the custodians of divine ordinances in temples and places of worship, when reciting during ritual prayer, at sacrifices, when praying, supplicating, and lamenting, as the prophet David used to do when reciting his psalms, and as the Christians now do in their churches and the Muslims in their mosques, with sweetness of tone and a melodic form of recitation – all that is used for hearts to be softened and souls to be humble, submissive, and obedient to the commands and prohibitions of God almighty.²⁷

Instead of relying on a static symbolic iconography as in European painting, music was understood to produce an affective iconography inhering in the recipient through audition. Elaborating on al-Kindi’s palette of three emotions, the Brethren suggest that the sages developed melodies evoking their proliferation. For example, sorrowful melodies would, “when heard, soften hearts, cause eyes to weep, and instil in souls remorse for past sins, inner sincerity, and a cleansing of conscience.”²⁸ Music would embolden soldiers to battle; be used around dawn in hospitals to alleviate the suffering of patients; offer solace at funerals and sooth sorrow; alleviate the exhaustion of the body and weariness of the soul during heavy labor; and complement rejoicing, delight, and pleasure, such as at wedding feasts. They argued that limited knowledge of music

²⁵ Berlekamp, 2011: 51. ²⁶ Wright, 2010: 76–77. ²⁷ Wright, 2010: 82.

²⁸ Wright, 2010: 83.

as entertainment fostered moralization against it.²⁹ Similarly, an eleventh-century theoretician, al-Hasan al-Katib, underscored music as conveying emotions in the hearer, suggesting that “the meaning of the melody is the goal of the composer ... just as with the speaker (of a language), these must resemble the various states and circumstances (of the soul).”³⁰ The tradition of interpreting music through the moods it evokes persists in the *tarab* tradition of contemporary Arab music.³¹

Like al-Farabi, the Brethren explain music through intermedial analogies, describing correspondences between the proportions of oud strings, poetic rhythms, and calligraphy: “The attacks on these strings then have the status of pens; the ensuing high notes, that of letters; the rhythmic melodies, that of words; song, that of utterances; and the air conveying them, that of parchment.”³² Thus conceiving of music as affective image and immaterial text, the Brethren proceed to describe music through human proportions. They describe a child growing through musical education, saying “it opens its hands and stretches [its arms] right and left like a bird stretching its wings.”³³ The ideal measure of the human relation to music resembles the animal whose capacities of flight and song exceed the human.

Plotinus similarly uses birds as a metaphor for human levels of erudition beyond materiality. He says:

All human beings from birth onward live to the realm of sense more than to the intellectual.

Forced of necessity to attend first to the material, some of them elect to abide by that order and, their life throughout, make its concerns their first and their last; the sweet and the bitter of sense are their good and evil; they feel they have done all if they live along the one and barring the doors to the other. And those of them that pretend to reasoning have adopted this as their philosophy; they are like the heavier birds which have incorporated much from the earth and are so weighted down that they cannot fly high for all the wings Nature has given them.

Others do indeed lift themselves a little above the earth; the better in their soul urges them from the pleasant to the nobler ...

But there is a third order – those godlike men who, in their mightier power, in the keenness of their sight, have clear vision of the splendor above and rise to it from among the cloud and fog of earth and hold firmly to that other world, looking beyond all here, delighted in the place of reality, their native land, like a man returning after long wanderings to the pleasant ways of his own country.³⁴

²⁹ Wright, 2010: 84 n. 30. ³⁰ Shehadi, 1995: 87. ³¹ Racy, 2004. ³² Wright, 2010: 117.

³³ Wright, 2010: 146. ³⁴ Plotinus, 1991: 425–426 (V.9.1).

As a Platonian allusion, the arm-as-wing suggests that the proportions intrinsic to the body of man are also those that enable flight out of weighted, bodily materiality into the realm of cosmic similitudes and, ultimately, comprehension of the divine. Echoing the Vitruvian model adopted by Leonardo da Vinci in his famous drawing of man at the center of the squared circle, the arm/wing soon becomes geometric, for “when it stretches its hand out above its head, and a pair of compasses with one point on its navel is extended to its fingertips.”³⁵ These in turn become a model for the distances between the stars and the planets, ultimately comparing God to “a creator who has made them [the stars and the strings of the lute] and a skilled artificer who has constructed them and a benign composer who has organized them.”³⁶

The strong connection between mathematics and music led ibn Sina to include a chapter on music in discussing educational sciences within philosophy. Although he does not seek a precise relationship between the cosmos, the states of the spirit, and music, he describes a phenomenology of music rooted in nature as a manifestation of the divine. Nature perpetuates itself through reproduction, and coupling animals need attraction, which requires that they produce sound. Among these sounds, music is unique in its capacity for seduction, which functions as follows:

The first of two notes produces on our soul a pleasant impression, like all unforeseen desirable things. This sensation is followed by another resembling that which reminds us of the sudden disappearance of something valuable to us, yet ephemeral. Following a pleasure, this regret disappears in turn when the second note follows. For us this is but the return of the first in another form: it enters into a relationship in the ear. For one knows that among the causes of pleasure is the surprise of a harmonious sensation following the regret of one that has been erased ... This is why the orderly combination of sounds, their composition, deeply seduces us, as do the regular and orderly combination of rhythmic percussions that cause one to imagine sounds in their relationship with nature.³⁷

The seductive capacity of music enables it to draw people from bodily to spiritual pleasures. In his *Lightning Flashes Concerning the Refutation of Those who Declare that Music is Forbidden*, Ahmad al-Ghazali (1061–c.1123) contextualizes audition as appropriate to the correct “time, the place, and the brethren.”³⁸ Yet he underscores that it must be available not only to those already on the path of knowledge, but also to those who might

³⁵ Wright, 2010: 146. ³⁶ Wright, 2010: 147. ³⁷ al-Farabi, 1930, vol. II: 109–10.

³⁸ Robson, 1938: 72. Ahmad al-Ghazali was the brother of the famous theologian Muhammad al-Ghazali.

happen upon it. Just as one who is not yet pure can go into a mosque to seek purity, so can one who “desires the purity of his soul, the cleansing of his heart, and the serenity of his spirit by listening to wonderful things in speech and comprehending delicate things in poems which uphold the establishment of his relationship to the angels and the cutting off of his relationship to the devils.”³⁹

He describes audition as a mode of mimetic representation articulating the divine in its recipient without an audio-iconographic language. By inciting ecstasy, it breaks through the resistance of selfhood, enabling recognition of truth through the similitude of notes:

The audition of this party is a reference to the observation of strange secrets in the delicate poems which the *qawwal* recites while joined to the ecstasy which arises in the heart of the gnostic who works and the novice who is perfect. It induces them to put off resistance, to be drawn to the presence of the One, the Powerful, and to ponder delicate things and secrets. And for the removal of these veils they have chosen audition with beautiful voices ... Then when there arises in him increase of arrangements of notes and spiritual analogies which are called music, [man's nature] prefers them to everything else. So when a person hears the analogies which pertain to notes which include the realities which pertain to taste and the truths which pertain to the Unity, the being inclines to all those, and every bodily member receives its portion separately. The hearing receives the things of the unrestrained analogies; the sight, the analogies of the movements; the heart, the delicate things of the realities; and the intellect, the inner consciousness of the unrestrained analogies.⁴⁰

Engagement with divine presence takes place not only through the ear, but through the apprehension of sound entering the heart and transforming into the movement that often accompanies the practice of remembrance (*dhikr*) undertaken in Sufi brotherhoods devoted to intrinsic rituals of worship. Al-Ghazali's position on music justifies ritual *sama*, the incorporation of audition into the process of remembrance. For this reason, he expands on the logic of lawfulness from Quranic cantillation (*taghbir*); sung poetry expressing elevated thoughts; and accompanied song with appropriate instruments.⁴¹

Al-Ghazali builds on these distinctions through a full iconography of the similitudes and analogies inherent to instruments.

The [form of] the tambourine is a reference to the cycle of existing things; the skin which is fitted on to it is a reference to general existence, the striking which takes

³⁹ Robson, 1938: 73. ⁴⁰ Robson, 1938: 71–73. ⁴¹ Rouget, 1985: 257.

place on the tambourine is a reference to the descent of the divine visitations from the innermost arcana upon general existence to bring forth the things pertaining to the essence from the interior to the exterior, the five small bells are a reference to the prophetic ranks, the saintly ranks, the apostolic ranks, the Caliphate ranks, and the imamate ranks, and their combined sound is a reference to the appearance of the divine revelations and unrestricted knowledge by means of these realities in the hearts of the saints and the people of perfection. And the soul of the reality is the form of the rank of the Truth, since it is He who sets the things in motion, brings them into existence, and enriches them. And the voice of the singer is a reference to the divine life which comes down from the innermost arcana to the levels of the spirits, the hearts, and the consciences. The flute is a reference to the human essence, and the nine holes are a reference to the openings in the outer frame ... And the breath which penetrates the flute is a reference to the light of Allah penetrating the reed of man's essence. And their being moved in audition is a reference to the bird of human reality in the station of the eternal address, "Am I not your Lord?" and to the excitement of the spirit on account of the cage of the body being broken and its return to the true home ... And the dancing is a reference to the circling of the spirit round the cycle of existing things on account of receiving the effects of the unveilings and revelations; and this is the state of the gnostic. The whirling is a reference to the spirit's standing with Allah in its inner nature and being, the circling of its look and thought, and its penetrating the ranks of existing things; and this is the state of the assured one.⁴²

Later recurrences of similar imagery suggest a common episteme, expressed in Muhammad al-Tusi's description of the tambourine as "the cycle of all created beings" in his treatise on audition.⁴³

Al-Ghazali's description of the flute reverberates with the famous introductory couplets of the *Mathnawi* of Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi:

Listen to this reed flute as it tells its tales

Complaining of separations as it wails:

"Since they cut my stalk away from the reed bed

My outcry has made men and women lament

I seek a breast that is torn to shreds by loss

So that I may explicate the pain of want"

Everyone who's far from his own origin

Seeks to be united with it once again.⁴⁴

⁴² Robson, 1938: 98–100. ⁴³ Lewisohn, 1997: 13. ⁴⁴ Rifai, 2011: 1.

Like the Brethren of Purity, who emphasize the intimate relationship between the proportions of music and calligraphic script, Rumi uses the trope of the reed – raw material for both flute (ney) and pen – to indicate the conceptual indivisibility between sound and writing. This similitude reflects the Quran, which describes itself as both as heard by the Prophet and as written by the reed pen (Q68:1–3).

Musical signification does not rely on semiotic indivisibility between the signal and signification as described in modern linguistics.⁴⁵ Rather than indicating an absent signified, the musical signifier functions as an expressive agent. The Brethren refer to this relationship as an image, saying:

When the meanings conveyed by melody and rhythm reach the mind via hearing, so that an image is formed there of the ideas that were contained within those rhythms and melodies, their existence [as vibrations] in the air can be dispensed with, just as writing on tablets can be dispensed with once the ideas written on them are understood and memorized.⁴⁶

Thus representation, whether musical or textual, emerges not in the opposition between absence and presence, but in apprehension emerging in the recipient. This understanding of meaning reverberates with a definition established already in the ninth century by scholar ibn Qutayba (828–889), for whom the ideal utterance “achieves a perfect correspondence between the word (*lafz*) and targeted meaning (*ma’na*): a successful poet achieves a mimetic operation; his utterance becomes a perfect and abstract combination of sense and form, and this combination replaces the extra linguistic object.”⁴⁷ Thus form does not give presence to meaning so much as meaning transcends its conveyance.

2.2 Music between Transcendence and Transgression

Music enabled such transcendence through the ritualized practice of collective audition, which seems to have emerged around the eleventh century, transforming the hazard of intoxication into a vehicle for divine knowledge. In his *Book of Audition* (*Kitab al-Sama*), al-Qushairi of Nishapur (d. 1074) describes *sama* as exposing every hidden ecstasy and disturbing every calm heart. Similarly, Ahmad al-Ghazali suggests that audition causes one to “throw off all restraint, to be drawn to the presence of the One, the Subduer, and to examine delicate things and secrets.”⁴⁸ In

⁴⁵ de Saussure, 2011: 67. ⁴⁶ Wright, 2010: 126. ⁴⁷ Lelli, 2014: 203. ⁴⁸ Gribetz, 1991: 50.

the *Alchemy of Happiness*, his elder brother Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali went even further, indicating audition as the only path to spiritual transformation.

Know that hearts and consciences are treasuries of secrets and mines of jewels. Wrapped within them lie their jewels just as fire is enveloped in iron and stone, and hidden like water is concealed under dust and loam. There is no way of extracting such hidden things save by the flint and steel of audition to poetry and *sama*, and there is no entrance to the heart save by the antechamber of the ears. So musical tones, measured and pleasing, bring forth what is in it and make evident its beauties and defects.⁴⁹

Such a perspective was not, however, universal. Ibn Arabi understood audition as a path for beginners, but unnecessary for more advanced adepts.

He who listens with his mind hears in everything, from everything, and through everything, without restriction; and the sign of that [type of listening] is silent amazement and physical motionlessness. He who listens with his flesh (*nafs*) – not with his mind (*‘aql*) – can hear only through melodies and sweet, yearning voices; and the sign of this is his motion while listening, in a manner of passing-away (*fan’a*) from perception.⁵⁰

Later Sufi orders held diverse opinions about music. Some, like the Chisti order, use it ritually, sometimes even overshadowing meditative *dhikr*. Others, like the Suhrawardiyya or the Naqshibandi, disdain it.⁵¹

Reflecting on this tension between transgression and transcendence, Amir Khosrau of Delhi (1253–1375), considered the father of *qawalli* devotional trance music, intertwines a discourse of drinking and music with the Quran. Echoing earlier assertions of the emotive power of music, he says:

Blessings upon he who, in a single moment, can move another
To weeping, to laughter, to wakefulness, to slumber!

God’s leave upon those persons who, when they sing:
By their song is raised up the gathered multitude –
and you will behold the people drunk!

Q 22:2 and you will behold the people drunk, but they will not be drunk (on the Judgement Day)

⁴⁹ Lewisohn, 1997: 1. ⁵⁰ Gribetz, 1991: 51. ⁵¹ Kugel, 2012.

The strings of your 'ud: O! sage-doctor of the lute –
Are in dearness to the lovers as the jugular vein!⁵²

Indicating an intertextual culture suffused with an omnipresent Quran (Q50:16) and yet also experienced in forbidden intoxication, the poem conceives of music as a bridge between transcendence and transgression.

Critics of music base their judgments on similar premises. The preservation of *Censure of the Instruments of Diversion* by ibn al-Dunya (823–894) and ibn Taymiyya's *Letter on Audition, Dancing, Shouting, and Listening to the Recitation of Poetry* in a unique 1391 manuscript suggests a limited circulation. Influential as the teacher of two Abbasid caliphs as well as of ibn Taymiyya, ibn al-Dunya found music guilty by association with forbidden practices such as drinking, gambling, and fornication.⁵³ Ibn Taymiyya declares music acceptable as entertainment for the young (as the Prophet allowed for his young wife A'isha), but censures pleasurable music as increasing sensual appetites, culminating in drinking and sexual intercourse. He uses the partial homology of *al-ghina* (song/entertainment music) and *al-zina* (fornication) to liken them as pleasures absent of reason, akin to drunkenness. Wine, music and the image analogously induce a state of drunkenness. He similarly condemns meditative audition practiced by Sufis, claiming that the ecstatic state induced by music merely replaces one passion for another and detracts from the meditation on God enabled through the Quran. A taste for poetry and music would thereby detract from the pleasures of the Quran, the only audition the Prophet clearly practiced.⁵⁴

Conversely, al-Hujwiri suggests that the permissibility of poetry and music alike results not from form, but from reception. He chastises those who forbid them for failing to recognize the Prophet's emphasis on content over form in saying, "What is good thereof is good and what is bad thereof is bad," whether in prose or verse.⁵⁵ Conversely, he recognizes that the claim of seeing God in everything leads people to a false Sufism, in which all sensuousness becomes facilely equated with the divine. He illustrates this in relation to music through a parable:

The whole of this topic is illustrated by the story of David, whom God made His viceregent and gave him a sweet voice and caused his throat to be a melodious pipe, so that wild beasts and birds came from mountain and plain to hear him, and the water ceased to flow and the birds fell from the air. It is related that during a

⁵² Ahmed, 2015: 426. ⁵³ El-Rouayheb, 2010; Nielson, 2012: 259. ⁵⁴ Shehadi, 1995: 95–99.

⁵⁵ al-Hujwiri, 1959: 398.

month's space the people who were gathered round him in the desert ate no food, and the children neither wept nor asked for milk; and whenever the folk departed it was found that many had died of the rapture that seized them as they listened to his voice ... Then God, wishing to separate those who listened to the voice and followed their temperament from the followers of the truth who listened to the spiritual reality, permitted Iblis to work his will and display his wiles. Iblis fashioned a mandoline and a flute and took up a station opposite to the place where David was singing. David's audience became divided into two parties: the blest and the damned ... The people of meaning were conscious of nothing except David's voice, for they saw God alone; if they heard the Devil's music, they regarded it as a temptation proceeding from God, and if they heard David's voice, they recognized it as being a direction from God; wherefore they abandoned all things that are merely subsidiary and saw right and wrong as they really are. When a man has audition of this kind, whatever he hears is lawful to him.⁵⁶

Thus al-Hujwiri argues that the medium is never the problem. Corruption occurs not in type of object, but in the subjective, internalized experience of reception.

The Brethren of Purity recognize similar pitfalls, saying: "The reason why music has been proscribed in some of the prophetic laws is that people have made use of it in a way different to that of the sages, in fact, for idle entertainment, and to incite a craving for the pleasures of this world and its deceptive desires."⁵⁷ Although at the end of his treatise, Ahmad al-Ghazali notes that "by common consent," instruments of diversion including the viol, lute (oud), Persian lute (*barbad*), reed-pipe, and all except the tambourine are prohibited, he initiates his discussions of the metaphysical benefits of audition by equating an absolute prohibition with blasphemous disrespect for the example of the Prophet. Noting those *Hadith* where the Prophet is mentioned listening to music, he explains: "He who says that audition is absolutely forbidden must acknowledge that the Prophet did what is forbidden, looked at what is forbidden, and confirmed others in what is forbidden. If that flutters in anyone's mind, he is an infidel by general consent, and the paths of the favours ... are closed to him."⁵⁸

The ambivalences of audition complement the seemingly contradictory relationship of Islamic societies with wine. Unlike the image or music, the Quran explicitly prohibits intoxication in association with gambling (Q2:219, 5:90). Yet passages also refer to the wine of paradise flowing in rivers and deliciously slaking the thirst of the pious (Q47:15, 83: 22, 25). In contrast, *Hadith* literature unequivocally recounts the enforcement of the

⁵⁶ al-Hujwiri, 1959: 402–403. ⁵⁷ Wright, 2010: 124–125. ⁵⁸ Robson, 1938: 70.

prohibition immediately after its revelation. Yet the enforcement of prohibitions was inconsistent. During the Abbasid period, wine was not only used medicinally, but was even associated with virtues. A student of ibn Sina recounts how after a reading, the group convened at the master's house (*majlis*) would enjoy music and singing to the accompaniment of wine, very much in the tradition of the symposium in ancient Greece.⁵⁹ In Andalusia, although the *majlis* represented an inversion of normal social orders, it also was structured to evoke Quranic language.⁶⁰

As a metaphor whose efficacy depends on experience, wine often served as a transgressive trope enabling transcendence. In his autobiographical writings, ibn Arabi frames participation in all-night drinking parties entertained with erotic song as one of his experiences of ignorance (*jahiliyya*) before his recognition of the divine path, around age twenty.⁶¹ This experience enters his poetry, where wine becomes a metaphor for the *Hadith*.

At the rock plains, near the bend of the trail
 is the place of meeting.
 Kneel your camels.
 Its waters are home.

...

Revel like maidens, breast curves alluring
 or gazelles that slow to graze
 and wander,

While the fly hums softly in the meadow
 and a songbird trills a reply.

Velvet is the fringe of the garden,
 tender the spring breeze,
 the cloud, lit from within by lightning,
 thunder rumbles the dark sky.

These stanzas allude to the work of Tarafah (543–679), the eminent poet of the *jahiliyya*, situating the subject at a recently deserted nomadic camp. Ibn Arabi thus relocates himself from the Andalusian tradition of his birth to the Meccan surroundings of his revelations. Nostalgia for a simpler past depends on tropes of love already embedded in the Sufi lexicon, expressed in the next lines:

⁵⁹ Ahmed, 2015: 57–64. ⁶⁰ Robinson, 1997: 152–153. ⁶¹ Elmore, 1998.

Rains burst like tears of a lover
 torn asunder
 from the one he loves.

The transportation of the subject emerges first through sorrow for the loss of the beloved, then through wine. The wine transports the reader to its initial fermentation:

Drink this ancient wine,
 drink deeply –
 Let the spell of its song take you –

Wine transforms into song – the lyric of the poem which is transporting us on this journey, reaching all the way to the beginning of humanity in the garden of paradise.

Wine of the age of Adam! bearing word,
 assured Hadith, down
 the generations,
 from the garden of sanctuary:

this wine, sweet
 as a rush of musk
 wine tasted on the lips'
 elixir kiss,
 of signoras,
 given me freely by signorinas.⁶²

The physical wine intertwines with song and lovemaking. It sensually draws ibn Arabi back to his pre-revelatory experience with women (in his youth in Spain). Yet the wine is also the iteration of the word of God as set in the descent of Adam and passed, like *Hadith*, across generations. Although a juridical reading of the canonical *Hadith* would forbid wine, a metaphorical understanding of both *Hadith* and wine allows the one to function as the other: the wine traversing time to entice and enchant the beloved is also the guidance of God as embodied in the *Hadith* since the beginning of time.

Connections between worldly lust, intoxication, and music remained a mainstay of Islamic poetry. The Arabic-language lyric poems of Rumi and the widely read Persian lyric poems in the *Divan* (collected works) of Hafez

⁶² Sells, 2008: 5–7.

of Shiraz (1315–1319) frequently draw on transgressive tropes as metaphors for divine love. For example, Rumi writes:

... Aren't you the one looking for immortality
in music? Look up! He comes to you now. He comes!
See! The full Moon! Let your eyes drink their fill. Their fill!
I'm happy, just staring here, drunk on his beauty ...
As if he filled my cup and gave me wine. Pure wine!⁶³

Hafez describes such divine awareness as emerging in the similitude between the physical beauty of the wine-bearer, wine, and music, contrasting it with the restrictions of mundane religiosity.

When in the morning from the chamber of the palace of novelties
The candle of the East casts its rays over all sides,

The heavenly sphere draws a mirror from the horizon's pocket and in it
Reveals the face of the world in thousands of guises.

In the corners of the pleasure dome of the Jamshid of the heavens,
Venus tunes the organ to the refrain of the dervish chant.

The harp strums arpeggios asking, "Where has the disapprover gone?"
The bowl falls to gurgling, "Where has the prohibiter gone?"

See the deposition of the wheeling. Take up the glass of joy,
Because in every outcome this is the best of states.⁶⁴

Literary ('*adab*) gatherings (*majlis*) with wine and music where such poetry would be shared and imitated proliferated. Abu Ishaq al-Husri (d. 1022) describes such events, saying:

The *majlis*: its wine is the ruby, its blossom is the rose, its orange is gold and its narcissi are dinars and dirhams carried by chrysolite ... a *majlis* in which the strings have begun to answer one another and the goblets to rotate; the flags of intimate fellowship are fluttering and the tongues of the musical instruments are speaking. We are seated between full moons while the wine cups are circulating.⁶⁵

With the onset of modernity, the Ottoman poet Leyla Saz (1850–1936) alludes to the same combination of literary social gathering and wine in lamenting the disarray of the era by saying, "Now hearts are a broken cup in a gathering of pleasure."⁶⁶

⁶³ Akhtarkhavari and Lee, 2016: 11. ⁶⁴ Avery, 2007: 359. ⁶⁵ Brookshaw, 2003: 199–200.

⁶⁶ Poulos, 2017: 107.

A painting by Sultan Muhammad (c.1500–1550) from a *Divan* of Hafez illustrates the ambiguities of music. It depicts a *sama* in the foreground. [Plate 4] Dervishes play the tambourine and clap, accompanied by a kneeling dervish playing a *keman*, a vertically held bowed string instrument. Another plays a ney. In the foreground, two figures dance; others have collapsed from exhaustion. A turban lies forlorn in the grass. A drunken customer is escorted out of the tavern behind them. Young men lower and carry wine pitchers for use elsewhere. Inside, a customer gives the shopkeeper money as he lowers a flask into one of several wine jugs. Yet for all its apparent debauchery, a bevy of angels set against a golden sky crowns the scene. As in the poem, these figures are also drinking.⁶⁷ In the center, like the musician who brings forth lover and beloved, an old man quietly reads, wineglass by his side, conjuring worlds simultaneously within and beyond his own. Like an artistic patron painted into a European votive painting, or like a painting that represents itself in the painting, he reflects the subjectivity of the reader enabled through poetry. With him, we read a couplet framed on the same page:

Mercy's angel gripped communion's cup
And poured a draft that pinked a huri's
And a fairy's cheek.⁶⁸

Much as music creates the image of love, here the poetic trope of opposition (*tanzih*) in similitude (*tashbih*) emerges as a painting. The contrast between sacred and profane demonstrates how seeming opposites in the material world reflect the self-disclosure of divine unity.⁶⁹ Juxtaposing seeming opposites, Sultan Muhammad visually elaborates Hafez's preference, expressed throughout the *Divan*, for the rogue dervish, whose humility drives him to seek self-effacing opprobrium over narcissistic piety. Audition imprints divine ecstasy within the Sufi practitioner's soul and becomes manifest in ritual movement of the body. In contrast to the European tradition, manifesting Man in divine form through the externalized visual image, the Sufi tradition used music to imprint an internalized image of the divine within the recognizing soul.

⁶⁷ The Quran refers to maidens in heaven with large eyes, as well as to *houris*, who are often conceived as heavenly virgins. However, the etymology is unclear and the exegetical interpretations varied.

⁶⁸ Barry, 2010: 217; Ahmed, 2015: 418–421. ⁶⁹ Çalıř-Kural, 2014: 88.

2.3 The Mutability of Form

In both theoretical writings and in poetry, music functions within a shifting lexicon of similitudes – the cosmos, bodily humors, emotions, calligraphy, a bird’s wing, a compass, architecture, painting, sexuality, wine – that suggest a non-finite, non-semiotic symbolic realm. The meaning that thereby emerges fits poorly with pervasive art-historical methods based in analytical categories of medium, genre, region, religion, and time analyzed through stable semiotic systems.

Despite its regional analytical framework of European painting, methods informed by Erwin Panofsky’s 1939 *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* remains central to globalized methods in art history. His revolutionary work integrated cultural interpretation into formalist art history by allowing the visual to be interpreted as semiotic text. Such interpretation of form as coded text presumes stable semiosis based on a one-to-one correspondence between sign and meaning. In contrast, a system of similitudes likening one form to another indicates meaning laterally, training the mind to understand seemingly disparate forms as expressions of the same essential matter. The Brethren of Purity elucidate this by explaining form (*sura*) as “every substance that admits form,” and matter (*hayula*) as “every shape and motif a substance is able to admit.”⁷⁰ Echoing Plato, expressive forms function as interchangeable reminders of a distant quiddity, the divine. Far from mere metaphors, the similitudes governing the interpretation of music underscore the ephemerality of all form in its transient relationship with matter. The associated analytic practice does not traverse time to a teleological origin, as in the Hegelian art-historical episteme, but crosses levels of creation originating in the divine.

In contrast to the stable, definite meaning sought in iconographic analysis, the lateral referentiality of similitudes frames the unknown, unknowable, and unseen. The Andalusian Sufi master ibn al-Arif (d. 1141) describes a symbol as “a call from a distance and a disclosure of an essential deficiency.”⁷¹ Meaning emerges in the slippage between forms, in a mutability that makes wine be as the *Hadith* be as poetry be as music be as sex be as architecture be as nature be as geometry be as calligraphy be as a bird.

The ontology of the object essential to this mobility of form contrasts that imposed by a modern episteme rooted in stable and distinct categories

⁷⁰ Akkach, 2005a: 36. ⁷¹ Akkach, 2005a: 32.

of genre, material, region, religion or timeframe. This conflict undermines the possibility of art history as a conduit for cultural understanding. As Foucault points out: “Order is, at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language.”⁷² Imposing its grid, its glance, and its language over objects, art history risks voiding the cultural substrate it claims to represent. Stable categories and semiotic methods sever the mobile ligaments of similitude, immobilize bones isolated as art, and reanimate them through the puppetry of history.

⁷² Foucault, 2005: xxi.

3 | The Insufficient Image

If music was understood as producing images in the soul, then how were visual images understood to communicate? This chapter examines the role attributed to music in a story about Plato playing the organ in the *Iqbalnamah* (1194) of Nizami of Ganj (1141–1209). A sixteenth-century illustration of the story extends this commentary to the comparative value of sonic and visual mimesis in light of increased awareness of European painting. Incorporation of the Simurgh, a figure central to Firdausi's *Shahnameh* (c.977–1000) and transformed in *The Language of the Birds* (*Mantiq al-Tayr*, 1177) by Farid al-Din Attar (1145–1221), suggests inter-medial and intertextual poetic theorization of the image in popular cultural forms. It reflects an understanding of Islam characterized less by a painting prohibition than by recognition of the image's insufficiency to represent the divine.

3.1 Plato as Musician in the *Iskandarnamah* by Nizami of Ganj

Verse often popularized converging philosophical and cultural discourses by transforming them into entertaining forms. Perpetuating the Alexandrian legacy in the Islamic sphere, Nizami's *Iskandarnamah* provided models for archetypal leadership. Just as Firdausi's Persian-language Islamized retelling of pre-Islamic histories in the *Shahnameh* bolstered the right to rule of the successive Samanid and Ghaznavid dynasties, Nizami's exaltation of the Macedonian King Alexander (r. 336–323 BC) reflected the Seljuq dynasty's interpolation of its own power with that of ancient Greece.¹

In the *Iqbalnamah*, an associated mirror of princes, Nizami includes an exemplary story pitting reason against inspiration as the path to knowledge. In it, Alexander's tutor Aristotle rises from a row of courtly poets to declare himself the pathfinder for all rational knowledge. Plato, "master of

¹ Pancaroğlu, 2001; Yalman, 2012.

all arts,” withholds praise and leaves to contemplate hidden wisdom. The story continues:

And as the star-watcher took his place in the cask (*khom*) and followed the traces of the spheres and the ways of the stars, he made a model of the sound of the harmonies that he found there. As he discovered the proportions for each sound on his lute, he began in his hiding place to weave the lute. For singing he laid the leather over the gourd and unharnessed the strings, and after he had rubbed the gazelle skin with musk, he brought wet sound out of the dry wood.

And so from his imagination and drafts did he create a form of organ ...

Plato had discovered a music that nobody other than him knew. From dry wood he elicits sounds that attract the spheres with their moisture.

When he moves his finger in one mode, all the animals fall immediately asleep. When he then plays another mode, he brings them from sleep to wakefulness.²

Alexander recognizes this music’s superiority as encompassing yet also exceeding existing knowledge. His subsequent preference for Plato over Aristotle incorporates the late antique practice of ‘correcting’ Aristotelian materialism through the filter of Platonic and Pythagorean mystical inspiration, and thereby modernizing earlier authorities.³

Plato’s competitive advantage comes from the organ (*urrganon*), described by al-Farabi as made by stretching a gazelle skin perfumed with musk over a gourd in which strings were set. Nizami’s selection of this instrument over more common ones may pun on the *Organon*, Aristotle’s six works on logic central to the institutionalization of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity in the late tenth century.⁴ Playing on the dream-like transformation of logic into an instrument, Nizami’s Plato supersedes reason by engaging the emotions of the pure at heart, represented by the animals.

The story condenses themes of cosmology, sleep, and music encountered in the *Epistle on Music* and al-Ghazali’s *Lightning Flashes* with Plato’s *Phaedo*, where Socrates, awaiting execution by poison, deems philosophy “the noblest and best art” (59–60), yet has a dream redefining philosophy as music. Similarly merging inspiration with intoxication, Nizami’s Plato seeks a meditative state in the solitude of a wine flask. Nizami’s conflation of Plato’s post-philosophical music with intoxication builds on an association, pointed out by Ahmad al-Ghazali, between audition (*sama*) and poison (*samm*) based on their shared consonants *sin* and *mim*, “meaning that the inner nature of audition is like poison which causes one to die from the attachments of things which are other than Allah and causes one to

² Nizami, 1991: 433–434. ³ Walbridge, 2000: 66; Fowden, 2015: 132. ⁴ Fowden, 2015: 129.

reach the unseen stations.”⁵ Like drinking, music is forbidden. Yet even as it poisons, it remedies the distance between human and divine. In *Phaedrus*, Socrates’ recognition of the *pharmakon* as simultaneously poison and cure suggests that remedy is indivisible from toxin. Socrates uses the myth of Thoth to discuss the proposition of writing as the remedy for forgetting. Yet the remedy necessarily misfires: writing preserves the form of speech but destroys the temporality through which discourse endures. It thus becomes a poisonous cure, apparently enabling that which it destroys.⁶ In contrast, music, like speech, retains temporality. Unlike reading or viewing, audition remains embodied in time. Yet its intoxication also comes at a cost, poisoning those who approach the divine with unprepared souls.

In Nizami’s poem, the heightened state enabled through the poison/cure of the wine allows Plato not only to access the music of the spheres, but also to balance contrasting elements such as dryness and moisture. The branching river surrounding Plato suggests the similitudes between nature and music as a linchpin in the sequence of contrasts that his music harmonizes. Similarly suggesting opposites, musk, the most valuable aromatic in the medieval Islamic world, not only conjures eroticism by its aphrodisiac function but also the death of the animals required for its harvesting.⁷ Engaging the taste of wine, the smell of musk, and the sound of music, the resulting organ affects the emotions so deeply that, like al-Farabi’s flute in [Chapter 2](#), it induces sleep. As al-Farabi noted, the resonant frequency between world and cosmos plays on the shared nature of humans and animals.⁸

The Brethren of Purity similarly recognize music as playing upon the soul of the listener:

It is also part of the musician’s skill to use the rhythms corresponding to [various] moments according to the [different] moods that correspond to them, that is, to begin at social invitations, feasts, and drinking parties with rhythms that reinforce the moral qualities of generosity, nobility, and liberality, such as the first heavy and the like, and then afterwords to perform joyful, gay rhythms ... and when there is dancing and ensemble-dancing ... At the end of the session, if he is afraid that those who are drunk might be noisy, rowdy, and quarrelsome, he should use slow, calm, and sad rhythms that quieten people down and send them to sleep.⁹

Likewise, Plotinus describes such sleep as an awakening from the delusion of materiality normally miring the body:

⁵ Robson, 1938: 103. For discussion of this form of analogy in Arabic poetry, see Akkach, 2018.

⁶ Derrida, 1981: 70. ⁷ King, 2008. ⁸ Shehadi, 1995: 62. ⁹ Wright, 2010: 161.

Thus far we have been meeting those who, on the evidence of thrust and resistance, identify body with real being and find assurance of truth in the phantasms that reach us through the senses, those, in a word, who, like dreamers, take for actualities the figments of their sleeping vision. The sphere of sense, the Soul in its slumber; for all of the Soul that is in body is asleep and the true getting up is not bodily but from the body: in any movement that takes the body with it there is no more than a passage from sleep to sleep, from bed to bed; the veritable waking or rising is from corporeal things, for these, belonging to the Kind directly opposed to the Soul, present to it what is directly opposed to its essential existence.¹⁰

Both Ahmad al-Ghazali and the Brethren suggest a similar transition from perception of forms to a suprasensory image-impression in the soul. Al-Ghazali says:

If you seek to open a comprehensive gate, verify the realities of the phenomena of every place. Then divest yourself of looking at the figures [ideas] whence comes all that constitutes the purest faith ... The farthest point reached by earthly lovers in their deserts is but the starting-point of the lover [i.e. the mystic] and of him whom realities enclose.¹¹

Similarly, the Brethren portray an imaginary assembly of philosophers at a court discussing the relative merits of sight and hearing. They explain:

When rational souls are free of the filth of bodily desires, abstain from natural pleasures, and are untarnished by materiality, they intone plaintive songs, recalling their exalted and noble spiritual world and yearning for it. But if [their instinctual] nature hears that [same] melody, it will reveal itself to the soul in the beauty of its forms and the splendor of its colors, in order to draw it back.¹²

In its ideal function, music affects the soul rather than simply pleasing it. It transcends materiality. The absence of music becomes equivalent to absolute annihilation in its intoxication. Without a body, there can be neither poison nor cure.

The paradoxes of the story enable its instructive function. Nizami's rendition of Plato as living in a flask identifies him with Diogenes of Sinop (412–323 BC), who divested himself of material goods, lived in a flask of the sort often used for wine (*pithos*) at the market of Athens, and mocked conventions of all sorts, including the reason of Plato and the power of Alexander the Great. Diogenes' witty remarks had been

¹⁰ Plotinus, 1991: 196. ¹¹ Robson, 1938: 100.

¹² Wright, 2010: 167. Considering the Arabic, I have revised Wright's translation with "instinctual" for animal (neither of which is in the text, but is an insertion of the translator), and "plaintive" for "sad" (*hazinet*).

introduced to the Islamic world much earlier, in the anthology of wisdom entitled *al-Mujtana* by ibn Durayd (d. 933).¹³ Plutarch relates that when Alexander visited Diogenes in Corinth, he found him sunning himself. In response to Alexander's question of what he desires, Diogenes merely requests that he "stand from between me and the sun."¹⁴ Nizami's erudite conflation of the philosophers and the encounter with Alexander offers sophisticated readers layers of meaning within an apparent allegory. Despite the apparent contradiction in conflating the rationalist Plato with the cynical Diogenes, Nizami uses the composite philosopher to sketch a figure recognizable as a Sufi dervish seeking divine union through disciplined renunciation. In the context of a guide for princes, the figure of Plato-as-Diogenes obliquely supports mendicant dervishes' critiques of state power and wealth by appealing to higher orders of truth.

3.2 Plato and the Organ of Painting

The only illustration of this scene appears in a late sixteenth-century Mughal manuscript of Nizami's *Khamasa* (Pentalogy), including his five major epic poems. The painting contextualizes the poem's meanings in an era of encounter with European visual arts. [Plate 5] It features Plato playing the organ. Golden dots on Plato's armpit, foot, and the sleeping animals suggest constellations corresponding to the music of the spheres. While Plato wears Mughal dress, the landscape depicted around him incorporates European perspectivalism and naturalism in the clouds, adopting the Renaissance European convention of depicting distant landscape in blue hues. It also retains Chinese-influenced, post-Timurid stylizations of mountains and leaves.¹⁵ Foregoing the Aristotelian connotations of the *Organon*, the painting shows one of the earliest organs collected by ambassadors of the court of Emperor Akbar to the Portuguese colony in Goa in 1581, forerunner of the harmonium still common in Indian classical music.¹⁶ Framed by a branching river, the figure is surrounded by many sleeping animals.

The illustration has proven difficult to interpret. Bonnie Wade comments:

The spirit of this painting remains puzzling to me, however. Some details lead one to wonder whether a compliment to anyone was intended. On one of the 'Italian' panels of the organ, the painting of a man with a tipped derby hat, looking like a sad sack, inserts an element of humor (or sarcasm?) to the scene. Most striking,

¹³ Rosenthal, 1958. ¹⁴ Plutarch, 2004: 14. ¹⁵ Lentz, 1993: 255. ¹⁶ Juneija, 2015: 63.

however, are the animals. They are badly drawn and look positively dead. Akbar's painters were masters at illustrating animals, and these creatures would surely not have qualified as well-drawn unless there was some real intent to the rendition.¹⁷

The solution to unclear intent becomes a judgment of poor quality.

In contrast, Ebba Koch convincingly interprets the illustration through Mughal associations between the Quranic King David, King Solomon, and the sovereignty of the Mughal ruler with the figure of Orpheus pacifying the beasts, a theme shared by Renaissance illustrations and late antique mosaics.¹⁸ The composition suggests models from European prints showing animals around a central Orphic figure.¹⁹ Such Orphic symbolism would become central to the iconography of kingship developed under Shah Jahan (1628–58), who included an image of Orpheus playing to the beasts, surrounded by images of birds, inset in *pietre dure* marble behind the throne at his palace in Delhi. Although arguing for local rather than imported craftsmanship, Koch denies Mughal knowledge of the Orphic tradition. Rather, perpetuating the segregation of Western and Islamic traditions, she suggests: “In the reign of Jahangir, exploiting European forms, images, symbols and allegorical compositions cut loose from their original content to express – in a new fusion of literature and art – conventional Islamic, Iranian, or Indian themes of rulership, had become ... established.”²⁰ She argues that the *pietre dure* insets, imports reflecting the wealth and cultural capital of the dynasty, expressed a Solomonic theme of just rule through affinity between King Solomon, the birds, and the animals surrounding the throne.

The artist Madhu Khazanad engages these themes in the detailed paintings on the organ. Plato's hands float over the keyboard, his eyes looking in rapt attention at the images. On top, a scene of a supplicant woman holding a baby before a seated ruler suggests Solomon's decision not to split a baby. Underneath, a scene of Majnun (the symbolic beloved who becomes a hermit because of his separation from Layla, who also represents the divine) with the animals confirms Koch's interpretation of the myths as intertwined. Her analysis concerning the royal symbolism surrounding Jahangir emphasizes Nizami's comparison between Majnun's sovereignty over the animals to that of Solomon.²¹ It does not, however note that

¹⁷ Wade, 1998: 153.

¹⁸ Syriac writing on a mosaic from the region of Edessa (modern Urfa) deaccessioned from the Dallas Art Museum (DEACC.1999.305) and restituted to Turkey in 2012 suggests the regional resonance of the theme.

¹⁹ Koch, 2010: 286. ²⁰ Koch, 1988: 11. ²¹ Koch, 2010: 291.

Majnun, as a poet in the wilderness whose main claim to fame is love, already has Orphic overtones in Nizami's rendition – long before Mughal painting developed a visual iconography to match.

Layered Orphic associations with Majnun and Plato cannot be reduced to a simple visual coincidence, as the Orphic implications of Pythagoreanism and Platonism were both familiar in Nizami's intellectual context.²² Undermining Koch's suggestion that the Mughals adopted European forms without recognizing their significance, the interplay between antique philosophy, Nizami's poetry, and its visual representation suggests direct engagement with ancient philosophical texts in both eras. Mughal interest may have reflected the introduction of Suhrawardi's Platonic, illuminationist philosophy by an immigrant Zoroastrian priest named Adhar Kayvan (b. 1530).²³ This culture was reflected at court: Akbar's biographer Abu'l Fazl's father Shaykh Mubarak was a follower of Suhrawardi.

In the *Constitution of Akbar* (*A'in-i Akbar*; 1590), Abu'l Fazl compares meaning in European painting to writing:²⁴

A picture (*surat*) leads to the form it represents, and this [leads] to the meaning, just as the shape of a line leads one to letters and words, and from there the sense can be found out. Although in general they make pictures (*tasvir*) of material resemblances, the European masters express with rare forms many meanings of the created world and [thus] they lead those who see only the outside of things to the place of real truth. However, lines [*khatt*: writing, calligraphy] provide us with the experiences of the ancients and thus become a means to intellectual progress.²⁵

Abu'l Fazl outlines a semiotics of the image through the same analogy with writing similarly articulated in Plato's *Phaedrus*, where Socrates doubts the suitability of both media to convey truth because of their deceptive remove from reality.²⁶ Yet Abu'l Fazl suggests that the work of the image transcends mere representation through the proliferation of meaning. European paintings allow truth to shine past the mere appearance of things, toward the appearance of the real. In this context, the unique illustration of this scene seems to set Abu'l Fazl's valorization of painting against the story's valorization of philosophy embodied in music. Illustrating musical affectivity through European visual verisimilitude, the painting suggests a competition between visual and aural representations of truth akin to that between reason and intuition enacted in Nizami's narrative.

²² Brisson, 2004: 89–92. ²³ Walbridge, 2001: 91. ²⁴ Singh, 2017: 69.

²⁵ Koch, 1988: 210. Detailed transliterations in her translation are suppressed here.

²⁶ Plato, 2005: 63.

The other two paintings on the organ represent this competition. On the bottom, a Mughal artist kneels before a European, who holds his paints. The portrait resulting from this interaction appears above, as indicated by the repetition of the hat above the head of a bald and beardless European. Rather than humor (as suggested by Wade), the hat's hovering at an angle alludes to a common trope of those associated with the 'school of love' (*madhab-i ishq*): a man with a crooked hat. A man who wore his hat at an angle (*kajkulahi*) indicated openness to worldly pleasures and the seduction of beauty. He also indicated that he disdained the mere appearances of moral uprightness and public propriety. The crookedness corresponds with our current valorization of the word 'queer,' as a transverse way of looking at and stepping away from social norms. One *Hadith* (of uncertain origin) reflects this with the words, "I saw my Lord as a young man, with his cap awry."²⁷ One of the most famous instances of this trope occurs roughly at the same time as this painting, in the *Tuzk-i Jahangir*, the memoirs of the sultan Jahangir (r. 1605–1627). The story describes the interaction between Sayyid Nizam-ud Din Awliya, patron saint of Delhi, and Amir Khosrau.

One day, Shaykh Nizam al-Din Awliya had placed his cap to the side of his head, and was sitting on a terrace by the River Jumna observing the spectacle of the Hindu rituals and devotions. Just then, Khosrau appeared. The Shaykh turned to him and said, "Do you observe this congregation?" and this hemistich came to his tongue:

For every people: it's path, it's *din*,²⁸ and its prayer-direction [*qibla*]!

The Mir, without a moment's contemplation, and with all due decorum, addressed himself to the Shaykh with the completing hemistich:

I have set my *qiblah* straight in the way of the crooked-hatted.²⁹

Why depict the European as crooked-hatted? The painting seemingly advocates an encounter with the other through incorporation rather than toleration. Just as crooked-hattedness suggests the wisdom to move beyond the known, its attribution to the European suggests wisdom in transgressing the restrictions of cultural habit. Perhaps a 'tip of the hat' to the antinomian wisdom hinted at by Nizami's allusion to Diogenes, it embraces difference despite the apparent danger of change. The artist emphasizes European norms in his depiction of the musical story of

²⁷ Schimmel, 1979: 131; see Hoffman-Ladd, 1992: 90.

²⁸ Although generally translated as 'religion,' *al-din* can also connote 'way of life' (Ahmed, 2015: 187–188).

²⁹ Ahmed, 2015: 203.

Plato and the animals. Yet the knowledge enabled by music and embodied by the meaning of the picture is crooked-hatted. This meaning proves more powerful than the European-style, equated with the organ attributed to Aristotle and critiqued through his defeat against Plato's music.

The animals in the painting resemble figures familiar from illustrations of the popular fables of *Kalila and Dimna*, compiled from several ancient Indian texts, translated into Pahlavi in the late sixth century, into Syriac by Bud and Arabic by ibn Muqaffa in the mid-eighth, into Persian verse by Rudaki (858–941), into Persian prose by Nasrullah Munshi in the mid-twelfth century, rendered as the Persian *Lights of Canopus* (*Anwar-i Suhayli*) by Husayn ibn 'Ali al-Wa'iz before 1505, and modified as the *'Iyar-i Danish* by Abu'l Fazl at the Mughal court in 1578. An illustrated version of Abu'l Fazl's rendition survives, with animal images comparable to those in this illustration.³⁰ Although frequently conceived as entertainment in modern discussions, the extensive translation of the fables underscores ibn Muqaffa's assertion, in the first introduction to the Arabic rendition, that it is a book of wisdom for sophisticated readers. Translated during the era in which Islamic texts became normalized, it became central to its discursive frameworks through repetition in many guises.

Quoting the *Lights of Canopus*, the Brethren link the affectivity of music with sleep, death, and the instinctual apprehension of animals used as metaphors for humans.

The nocturnal lament of the lute string
is sweeter to my ear than [the cry of] "God is great!"

If the plaint of the lute string – and do not think this strange –
attracts its prey from the wide plains,

With no arrow it yet from time to time
pierces its body, the dart transfixing the heart,

Now weeping, now grief-stricken,
from break of day through noon till dusk.

Although bereft of a tongue, its eloquence
can interpret the lovers' story,

Now making the madman sane,
now casting the sane under its spell.³¹

³⁰ de Blois, 1990: 6; Grigore, 2013. ³¹ Wright, 2010: 165.

Thus the “nocturnal lament” of the string, inducing sleep like Plato’s music, also suggests death, with the “dart transfixing the heart” of “prey.” If the animals in the painting appear sleeping to the point of death – tongues hanging out, eyes wide open, and one near the top left even with the mark of an arrow on her flank – it may be because the sleep induced by a music resonant with divine ecstasy enables knowledge that transcends life. The animals, merely pacified by Orphic song in Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* (Book 11), here gain his ability, unique among mortals, to freely cross the boundary between life and death through the ‘spell’ of music. Just as Plato playing music in Nizami’s poetry enables an oblique, crooked-hatted critique of rationalism, Khazanad’s inclusion of the animals extends Nizami’s critique to the rationalism embodied in visual verisimilitude. Music wins over painting because, in directly touching the soul, it transcends the boundaries between life and death that distinguishes the mortal from the divine.³² Yet the subtle sophistication of Khazanad’s painting obliquely suggests that painting also holds its own in transcending mere forms to produce true meaning.

Discursively engaging in the manner of modern critical prose, the painting visually suggests that European practices of representation can be subsumed into a powerful existing canon of mimetic representation in which sensory perception, poetry and painting, image and sound, animal and philosophy, wakefulness and dreaming, life and death, Muslim and European coexist through their essential similitudes. The selective appropriation of European verism emerges not as an accidental appropriation of a supposedly advanced European practice, but as a considered incorporation of European techniques within a Mughal mimetic order.³³ Far from representing only a geographically and temporally bounded Mughal perspective, its expressiveness depends on a powerful legacy of aesthetic discourse articulated through antique Greek philosophy dissolved within Islamic discourses.

3.3 The Simurgh

The animals surrounding Plato in the painting are not simply exotic, but include the mythical Simurgh, also among the birds framing Jahangir’s throne. Yet the Simurgh is irrelevant to Nizami’s text. Why is the Simurgh sleeping in this painting? Although subtle, its appearance is replete with meaning. The Simurgh often appears where it does not belong, floating

³² Northwood, 2015. ³³ Singh, 2017: 9.

over figures in paintings or alone on tiles or everyday objects. These visitations suggest intertextual associations with the bird that imbue it with a complex iconography.

Introduced to the Persian-Islamic literary canon in Firdausi's *Shahnameh*, the mythical Simurgh echoes multiple traditions of giant birds carrying humans (the *saena* of the Avesta, the Middle Persian *Sen Merv*, Zeus in the myth of Ganymede, and the Egyptian god Theuth, also known as Ammon, son of the sun who comes to earth concealed in an egg) or associated with fire (the Hindu Garuda, the Chinese Fenghuang, and the Greek Phoenix). It is central to several tales in the *Shahnameh*. When the hero Rustam's father, Zal, is born with white hair, his father Sam leaves him to perish on a mountain. The Simurgh finds him and takes him home to feed his chicks, but ends up raising him alongside them. Sam repents, and the Simurgh returns Zal, giving him a feather to burn if ever in need. Zal calls upon him twice: one to enable his beloved Rubedah to give birth to their son, the hero Rustam, through an incision (i.e. a Caesarean section) that the feather would render painless and help heal; and again, to heal Rustam and enable him to combat his foe, Asfandiyar. Although it is a minor mythical figure in the *Shahnameh*, Firdausi affiliates the Simurgh with the divine by attributing Zal's protection to God.

The Simurgh also features in the twenty-second epistle of the Brethren of Purity, where it serves as king of the birds and evaluates the qualities of each species to select one as emissary to the court of the *jinn* to defend against the human claim that animals should be subservient to humankind. Echoing the competition between Aristotle and Plato, the Simurgh selects the nightingale, suggesting song over language and emotion over speech as the more important rhetorical tool.³⁴

In Attar's *Language of the Birds*, the Simurgh gained a starring role in popular epic poetry. The work's title refers to a statement in the Quran made by Solomon upon succeeding David: "People, we have been taught the speech of the birds"³⁵ (Q27:13). Soon after Solomon chides the Hoopoe for his absence, the bird appears with news of Bilqis (the biblical Queen of Sheba), whose heliolatry veers from the righteous path of monotheism. The Hoopoe communicates with Solomon, whose wisdom enabling communication with birds reflects his ordained sovereignty. Building on this Quranic narrative, Attar's poem develops a frame story describing the quest, led by the Hoopoe, of a multi-species group of birds for their just king – the Simurgh. The poem inverts the fable format by relating parables

³⁴ Goodman and McGregor, 2009: 162–172. ³⁵ Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 240.

featuring humans, told by the Hoopoe. It combines elements of earlier theological prose, including the anonymous *Epistle of the Birds* (controversially attributed to Abu Hamid al-Ghazali), derived from ibn Sina's *Epistle of the Birds*, based on a fable in *Kalila and Dimna*, as well as Suhrawardi's treatise *The Simurgh's Shrill Cry*.³⁶

A story in *Kalila and Dimna* tells of a flock of birds ensnared in a hunter's net, liberated by the gnawing of a humble mouse. Developing the story into a parable about the human condition, ibn Sina locates himself among the birds who, once trapped, become so consumed with their personal suffering that they adjust to their fetters and forget to attempt escape. He notices a group of birds flying by with traces of snares on their feet, indicating that they had escaped capture but were nonetheless not free. He calls for their assistance, and they liberate him. He asks them to remove the traces of the snares, and they say, "Were it in our power, we should have begun by removing those that encumber our own feet. How should the sick cure the sick?"³⁷ They then fly together on a long journey past several mountains, finally gliding to a verdant seventh summit of delightful music, sweet scents, flowing rivers, and gardens with fruit trees. Recognizing the plenitude as a trap, they travel further, until they come to a city beyond the mountains with an expansive court. When the last veil hiding the king is drawn, the birds are stupefied by his splendor. Initially dumbfounded, they finally articulate their problem. The king responds that they can only be released by those who trapped them. They thus return with a message of salvation. Like Aristotle, ibn Sina recognizes the utility of parable to communicate with the uninitiated. However, as Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides, 1138–1204) would also advocate in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, ibn Sina emphasizes the importance of publicly hiding a story's educational nature.³⁸

The *Epistle of the Birds* similarly insinuates esoteric philosophies within popular forms. In contrast to ibn Sina's implication that man works out his own salvation through physical and intellectual effort, the anonymous tale emphasizes salvation through faith.³⁹ It begins with the birds assembling to select a king and agreeing upon the Simurgh, who lives on a western island. Interjecting poetry about Layla (from the romance of Layla and Majnun) to describe the quest for the beloved, the narrative shifts toward the trope of the divine beloved as it moves beyond *eros*/*'ishq* toward the more essential longing conceived in ancient Greek as *agapé*.⁴⁰ The birds' inexorable love

³⁶ Titley and Waley, 1975. ³⁷ Corbin, 2014: 189. ³⁸ Stroumsa, 1992: 191–193.

³⁹ Faris, 1944: 46–47. ⁴⁰ El-Bizri, 2001: 763.

leads them to ignore a voice from beyond the clouds warning, “Throw not yourself with your own hands into ruin” (Q2:191). They set out on a difficult quest across mountains and valleys of torrid heat and frigid cold. When they finally arrive, they are denied an audience with the king, who has no need for them. Forbidden from staying yet unable to return, they seek death and take refuge in prayer. Recognizing their contrition, God eases their despair by revealing himself as the cause of their journey. The story concludes by stating that only those who understand the language of the birds through faithful prayer can truly recognize the divine.

Metaphysical associations with the Simurgh expand in Suhrawardi’s *The Simurgh’s Shrill Cry*. Suhrawardi connects the Quranic Hoopoe with the quest for the Simurgh described in the *Epistle of the Birds*: “Those who have been illuminated have shown that every Hoopoe that abandons his nest in springtime and plucks his feathers with his beak and sets off for Mount Qaf.”⁴¹ The title of the [seventh chapter](#) of the Quran, Mount Qaf represents the root of all mountains, part of a circle of mountains circumscribing the world emerging in Mesopotamian and Buddhist mythology and reinscribed in both the Pahlavi and Arabic traditions.⁴² Suhrawardi uses this association to indicate that the Hoopoe will realize the Quranic revelation (Q22:47) that “one day with thy Lord is as a thousand years, of those which ye compute,” by falling under the shadow of the mountain, transforming him into the Simurgh. Although not equating the Simurgh with God, Suhrawardi renders him with comparable attributes.

The Simurgh’s nest is on Mount Qaf. His cry reaches everyone, but he has few listeners; everyone is with him, but most are without him ...

The ill who totter on the brink of dropsy and consumption are cured by his shadow, and it causes various symptoms to vanish ...

This Simurgh flies without moving, and he soars without wings. He approaches without traversing space. All colors are from him, but he himself has no color. His nest is in the orient, but the occident is not void of him. All are occupied with him, but he is empty of all. All knowledge emanates and is derived from his shrill cry, and marvelous instruments such as the organ have been made from his trilling voice.⁴³

The Simurgh emerges through layers of cross-cultural allusion. As a metaphor for divine light (containing color without having one), the Simurgh may reflect ancient Roman and Buddhist associations of the Phoenix with the sun. These associations were particularly important in

⁴¹ Suhrawardi, 1982: 88. ⁴² Prior, 2009. ⁴³ Suhrawardi, 1982: 88–89.

Suhrawardi's philosophy. His combination of Hellenic philosophical tradition with Islamic hermeneutics enabled a powerful narrative of sovereignty supporting the Seljuq and Artukid dynasties, reflected in the adoption of Hellenistic Apollonian imagery and solar geometric motifs.⁴⁴ Such solar imagery reemerged as part of the Mughal amalgamation of earlier dynastic traditions, where the prominence of the Simurgh in relation to throne imagery may have reflected the incorporation of Suhrawardi's illuminationist interpretations of Islam.⁴⁵

Suhrawardi's elaboration of Firdausi's fire imagery enhanced the solar implications of the Simurgh: "His food is fire, and whoever binds one of his feathers to his right side and passes through fire with be safe from burning." The Simurgh's emergence from the voice suggests the Quran's emergence through recitation: "The zephyr is from his breath; hence lovers speak their hearts' secrets and innermost thoughts with him."⁴⁶ The healing properties of the Simurgh, alluded to in the *Shahnameh*, gain Platonic associations through Suhrawardi. In twelfth-century Nishapur, Platonism circulated through both philosophical and medical texts, such as the late eleventh-century *Book of Antidotes* (*Kitab al-Diryaq*) attributed to the second-century physician Galen of Pergamon, known to esteem Plato.⁴⁷ For Plato, the rhetorician functions like a doctor. Firstly, he must know how to persuade by manipulating linguistic structures, much as a doctor matches medicine to illness.⁴⁸ More importantly, both must evaluate the ability of the audience/patient to internalize the cure. Like medicine, rhetoric thus constitutes an art of internalized aesthetics, ultimately focused on the substrate of reception. Aristotle (384–322 BC) propagated this idea further, such as in his *The Art of Rhetoric*, when he explains that the function of rhetoric is not persuasion, but the detection of the persuasive aspects of each matter – just as the function of medicine is not to produce good health, but to enable care based on understanding the realm of possibility.⁴⁹

This may have influenced how Abu Hamed Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr Ebrahim, (or, according to other sources, ibn Sa'd ibn Yusof) of Nishapur, chose the sobriquet through which we know him: Farid al-Din Attar, which means 'Unique of the Religion, Perfumer.' As a peddler of rose oil and other perfumes and spices, he provided medical cures – in one of his poems, the *Khosraunamēh* (Book of Khosrau), he describes writing

⁴⁴ Yalman, 2012. ⁴⁵ Malecka, 1999. ⁴⁶ Suhrawardi, 1982: 89.

⁴⁷ von Staden, 1995; Pancaroğlu, 2001. ⁴⁸ Plato, 2005: 56. ⁴⁹ Aristotle, 1991: 70.

another long poem while serving the needs of 600 patients daily.⁵⁰ The inordinately large volume of patients hints toward a metaphorical implication for his sobriquet, suitable for a poet who offers a unique cure for religion from the *pharmakon* of rhetoric.

Attar and his readers would have been well aware of the Platonic trope of writing as medicine. The trope appears in the less common of the two prefaces of the eighth-century Arabic translation of *Kalila and Dimna*. In contrast to the other preface, where Anoushirwan sends the doctor Borzuya to acquire a book of wisdom from India, in this version he sends Borzuya to acquire a plant that revives the dead, but he returns with books. While the reasons behind this alternative remain unclear, the philosophical underpinnings of the need for medicine being fulfilled by a book of wisdom may parallel the Hellenization of medical terms in the Arabic translation of the narrative of Borzuya's voyage.⁵¹ This version was disseminated widely through Firdausi's *Shahnameh*. Under the king's patronage, Borzuya sets off to India to find a silk-like plant capable of making the dead speak. Frustrated by his search, he encounters an elderly sage, who says:

the plant that you have tried
 So hard to find is speech, the mountainside
 Is knowledge, and the corpse is any man
 Who's ignorant, since only knowledge can
 Give us life.⁵²

Whether or not people encountered Plato's *Phaedrus*, through Firdausi they would have encountered an element of its wisdom. Such popularization of Sufi metaphysics through poetry had already been achieved by Sanai of Ghazna (1080–1131/1141).

In keeping with these forebears, Attar addressed the public through direct language and imagery rather than through theory, offering a rhetoric suitable to popular reception. His sobriquet structurally resembles that of Shahib al-Din of Suhraward, "meteor of the religion," centralizing his philosophy of illuminationism through allusion to the Black Stone at the Kaaba, the nexus of all Islamic worship. In an era of religious controversy, the translation of illusionism into poetry may have provided a subterfuge through which Islamized Platonism could flourish, while his sobriquet may have offered an ideological code difficult to censor. Rather than

⁵⁰ Boyle, 1979: 9. ⁵¹ de Blois, 1990: 40, 27. ⁵² Ferdowsi, 2007: 706.

announcing him as a perfumer, or as a pharmacist, his sobriquet may indicate him as a Platonist.

Appropriating the inverted fable format, Attar's *Language of the Birds* excludes ibn Sina's initiating tale from *Kalila and Dimna*, but recasts his frame story through Suhrawardi's Platonic–Solomonic elaboration of the Simurgh. Attar's frame narrative relates the quest of an assembly of birds. Led by the Hoopoe, they travel across the seven oceans to Mount Qaf seeking their king, the Simurgh. The Hoopoe inspires the woeful birds with a story:

The matter with the Simurgh – O miracle! –
 Began once to disclose itself in China.
 A feather fell down from her in the midst of China,
 Whereupon turmoil seized the whole country.
 Everybody procured himself an image of that feather
 And whosoever beheld the image started to act.
 This feather is, thus, in the picture gallery of China.
 "Seek knowledge, be it even from China!"
 If the image of her feather had not disclosed itself,
 This uproar would not be in the world.
 All these works of creation are there because of her/its radiance.
 All images stem from the image of her feather.
 But since her description has neither beginning nor end,
 It is not befitting to speak more about her.⁵³

The feather resembles that of Suhrawardi's Hoopoe, who sets off in springtime, plucks his feathers, and transforms into the Simurgh over the course of a millennium. While the feather appears as a material trace, it transforms into the image of a feather. People are fated to merely reproduce images of that image.⁵⁴ Although incited to action by the image (*naqsh*) of the trace, no accumulation of images satisfies them. False images fill an entire picture gallery, yet bring their viewers no closer to the Simurgh, who only exists through the works of creation revealing her radiance. Nonetheless, reflecting the quoted *Hadith* to seek unbounded knowledge, even false images are

⁵³ Bürgel, 1988: 6.

⁵⁴ Suggesting that the feather may not be there at all, Hamid Dabashi argues that the truth attributed to it through its representations underscores a repression of vision central to Islam. Using a positivist paradigm valorizing presence over absence, he identifies the missing signifier of the feather, like that of God, as a lack that Islam must pathologically veil. Yet outside of this logocentric paradigm, the physical existence of the feather becomes secondary to the fact of belief that ultimately constitutes the Simurgh. Dabashi, 2003: 964.

worth the greatest hardships. Far from reflecting a prohibition of images, the poem emphasizes their inherent insufficiency. Nonetheless, they have value in directing the seeker toward a more meaningful yet arduous path to divine apprehension.

The human incapacity to represent the Simurgh results not simply from mental insufficiency, but from the bird's immateriality, as Firdausi's Simurgh transforms into a Suhrawardian vessel of light:

When long ago Simorgh first appeared –
His face like sunlight when the clouds have cleared –
He cast unnumbered shadows on the earth,
On each one fixed his eyes, and each gave birth.
Thus we were born; the birds of every land
Are still his shadows – think, and understand.⁵⁵

This light is the source of creation – the birds are the shadows of the divine. This articulates Suhrawardi's assertion that all matter is a light-emanation of the divine. The helioid face of the Simurgh thus paradoxically casts shadows, which are that which we take as real.

If you had known this secret you would see
The link between yourselves and Majesty ...
If He had kept His Majesty concealed,
No earthly shadow would have been revealed.⁵⁶

Enabling the apprehension of God as light, the Simurgh's emanation manifests as earthly shadows embodied in the creation of 'the birds,' indicator not only of the multiplicity of our human bodies, but also of each unique human soul and challenge. We exist not through our materiality, but through the distinction between our physical selves and divine light. Without bodies, divine light could not appear framing shadows. Far from negating physicality and visuality, the discourse of shadow necessitates matter. Only against a material backdrop can we apprehend transcendence.

This imagery derives from Suhrawardi's understanding of Plato. He explains: "Plato and his companions showed plainly that they believed the Maker of the universe and the world of intellect to be light when they said that the pure light is the world of intellect."⁵⁷ Suhrawardi describes all being as emanation from the Light of Lights. Material creation is the shadow of this being. Attar's adoption of the characteristics of the Light of Lights for the Simurgh constructs an iconography for the divine. It

⁵⁵ Attar, 1984: 52. ⁵⁶ Attar, 1984: 52. ⁵⁷ Suhrawardi, 1999: 110.

represents that which cannot be represented, but which people compulsively try to represent. The Simurgh emerges as an icon of the impossibility of the icon.

Yet the Simurgh cannot be considered as an isolated sign. Rather, its aniconicity depends on the multiplicity and mutability of images through which painters could manifest the ineffability of the divine. This reflects the formulation of the Shafi'i jurist al-Juwayni (d. 1085) of a normative stance toward the form of God: "Whoever stops at something which exists and in which he is capable of conceiving is an anthropomorphist. Whoever stops at pure negation is an atheist. [...] Whatever you formulate in your imagination, God is not that."⁵⁸ The shifting nature of these representations reflected a need to destabilize divine form, so that the ineffability of God would always emerge outside of any image. Gruber describes this as challenging painters of the *mi'raj* to depict the divine through a "balancing act' ... through various visual stratagems, most important among them the cloud, veil and light metaphors, celestial and angelic motifs and color symbolism."⁵⁹ Attar's rendition of the Simurgh offers yet another form for not-picturing the divine, but rather to allow God to emerge between the successive failures of representation.

In Attar's work, the birds follow the Hoopoe, but, weighed down by their human frailties and worldly concerns, many perish along the way. When, bedraggled, they finally arrive at the mountain, they are refused access. As the Simurgh has no form, it can only be apprehended through self-reflection, through which being is perceived as the shadow of the divine. The birds nonetheless insist, relating the parable of the moth whose attraction to the flame is so strong that he annihilates himself in it. The herald unlocks the door for them. Then,

A hundred veils drew back, and there before
The birds' incredulous, bewildered sight
Shone the unveiled, the inmost Light of Light.⁶⁰

Although a step closer to the throne, the birds may not proceed. They first must consider the tale of Joseph's brothers groveling before him in shame for their failure to recognize his divine emanation. Recognizing their own failure to abnegate the self in their expectation of a reward, the birds absorb the brothers' ignominy: a true supplicant maintains no self. In the moment of this self-abnegation:

⁵⁸ Quoted in Gruber, 2019: 133. ⁵⁹ Gruber, 2019: 134. ⁶⁰ Attar, 1984: 217.

Their souls rose free of all they'd been before;
 The past and all its actions were no more.
 Their life came from that close, insistent sun
 And in its vivid rays they shone as one.
 There in the Simorgh's radiant face they saw
 Themselves, the Simorgh of the world – with awe
 They gazed, and dared at last to comprehend
 They were the Simorgh and the journey's end ...
 But they ask ... – how is it true
 That 'we' is not distinguished here from 'you'?
 And silently their shining Lord replies:
 "I am a mirror set before your eyes,
 And all who come before my splendor see
 Themselves, their own unique reality."⁶¹

It turns out that the thirty birds – *si murgh* in Persian – inhabit the divine emanation as soon as the veils of worldliness lift from them. The Simurgh has always been a red herring, a form – like poetry itself – used to guide the uninitiated toward the formless. It is yet another misleading image of the fallen feather reminding of us of the human incapacity to apprehend, and the impossibility of representing, the divine. While the colorful image of the Simurgh may remind us of the divine light, the divine, as light itself, can never have an image.

The association between the sun and divinity has numerous antecedents. Although some modern scholars suggest a pre-Islamic sun deity in the Arabian Peninsula, the erasure of *jahiliyya* from Islamic culture and their distance in time and place render this source unlikely for Attar. The allusion is also central for Plotinus, who understands the sun as the crux of divine beauty, at once occluded from vision and central to it. First, he explains, "All the loveliness of color and even the light of the sun, being devoid of parts and so not beautiful by symmetry, must be ruled out of the realm of beauty."⁶² Yet the sun is also the ultimate goal of beauty:

Never did eye see the sun unless it had first become sunlike, and never can the soul have vision of the First Beauty unless itself be beautiful.

Therefore, first let each become godlike and each beautiful who cares to see God and Beauty. So, mounting, the Soul will come first to the Intellectual-Principle and

⁶¹ Attar, 1984: 218. ⁶² Plotinus, 1991: 46 (1.6.1).

survey all the beautiful Ideas in the Supreme and will avow that this is Beauty, that the Ideas are Beauty.⁶³

Like the sun, Attar's Simurgh contains all color, and yet embodies non-presence. Its colorful feathers – the world that we experience around us – manifest its ethereal invisibility.

Similarly, 'Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani (d. 1078), a Persian scholar of Arabic, interprets the Quranic expression "my head is all aflame with hoariness" (Q19:4) through the aesthetics of light, comparing the metaphor with the sun as the source that makes visible the truth of the unseen.⁶⁴ Merging Islamic with Platonic allusions, neither al-Jurjani nor Attar equate the sun with God, which would constitute *shirk*. Rather, the sun's absolute light metaphorically describes divine illumination.

The unity of the birds concluding Attar's poem reflects Suhrawardi's explication of the concept of *tawhid* (unity) through the erasure of the distinction between individuals, as well as between the individual and God.

The most masterly of all say that, 'you-ness,' 'I-ness,' and 'he-ness' are all terms superfluous to the Self-Subsistent Essence. They have submerged all three locutions in the sea of obliteration. They have destroyed expressions and eradicated references.

And everything shall perish, except himself. (Q28:88)

... A great mystic was asked, "What is sufism?" He replied, "Its beginning is God, and its end is infinite."⁶⁵

The idea resembles the danger described by Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo*:

As people may injure their bodily eye by observing and gazing on the sun during an eclipse, unless they take the precaution of looking at the image (*eikona*) reflected in the water, or some analogous medium. So in my own case, I was afraid that my soul might be blinded altogether if I looked at things with my eyes or tried to apprehend them with the help of the senses. And I thought that I had better have recourse to the world of *idea* and seek there the truth of things.⁶⁶

Just as the birds only become able to perceive the divine light in themselves through the mirror of truth after preparing themselves through the difficult journey of the Sufi supplicant, Plato recognizes the danger in being blinded by the light of truth.

Yet in Attar, neither image nor icon deflects the danger of divine immolation. Instead, he compares the birds to the mystic al-Hallaj. After

⁶³ Plotinus, 1991: 46 (1.6.9). ⁶⁴ Vilchez, 2017: 52, 53 n. 81. ⁶⁵ Suhrawardi, 1982: 95.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Derrida, 1981: 89 (99d–100a).

many years of ascetic ritual observance, it is said that he returned to his hometown, a suburb of Baghdad, and began to deliver his vision of God's message. He spoke of wanting to sacrifice his life for the law and was imprisoned as insane. When he announced, "I am truth!" he was tried for *shirk* and executed in 922 CE. For Attar, the dissolution of the birds in the divine reenacts his example.

Hallaj's corpse was burnt and when the flame
Subsided, to the pyre a sufi came
Who stirred the ashes with his staff and said:
"Where has that cry 'I am the truth!' now fled?
All that you cried, all that you saw and knew,
Was but the prelude to what now is true.
The essence lives; rise now and have no fear,
Rise up from ruin, rise and disappear –
All shadows are made of nothing in the one
Unchanging light of Truth's eternal sun."⁶⁷

Attar could not have known that Suhrawardi would, in 1191, also be convicted and executed for *shirk*.

Attar associates the death of al-Hallaj with music through the Phoenix, alter-ego of the Simurgh, whose perpetual cycle of rebirth articulates the true meanings of life. He says:

In India lives a bird that is unique:
The lovely phoenix has a long, hard beak
Pierced with a hundred holes, just like a flute –

...

Each opening has a different sound; each sound
Means something secret, subtle, and profound –
And as these shrill, lamenting notes are heard,
A silence falls on every listening bird;
Even the fish grow still. It was from this
Sad chant a sage learnt music's artifice.
The phoenix' life endures a thousand years
And, long before, he knows when death appears;

...

⁶⁷ Attar, 1984: 218.

He builds a pyre from logs and massy trees

...

Each plaintive note trills out, from each pierced hole
Comes evidence of his untarnished soul –
Now like a mourner's ululating cries,
Now with an inward care the cadence dies

...

So death draws near and as the phoenix sings
He fans the air with his tremendous wings,
A flame darts out and licks across the pyre –
Now wood and phoenix are a raging fire

...

The pyre's consumed – and from the ashy bed
A little phoenix pushes up its head.
What other creature can – throughout the earth –
After death takes him, to himself give birth?⁶⁸

Through the *Simurgh* narrating this tale to the birds, Attar challenges his human reader to fathom the solitude of the Phoenix, transformed into a flute and eternally reborn alone. Through association with al-Hallaj, the Phoenix becomes a parable rewarding martyrdom for the sake of truth with eternal rebirth, reflecting Hindu concepts of reincarnation.⁶⁹ The description of a whistling sound, unprecedented in earlier depictions, suggests Attar's awareness of Hindu rituals of burning the dead on funeral pyres, during which process bodies often pop and hot air whistles while passing through bone.⁷⁰

Like the Quran between sound and word, book and tablet, the *Simurgh* oscillates between being and non-being. While immaterial in Attar's text, the *Simurgh* gains a visual iconography at the end of the thirteenth century. This convention derived from the Chinese image of the Fenghuang. Early Chinese renditions appear as early as the seventh or eighth century, probably based on Western forms. These changed in the eleventh century through contact with Sasanian art.⁷¹ An early example appears in a

⁶⁸ Attar, 1984: 116–117.

⁶⁹ Although the association with fire suggests Zoroastrianism, such death would be anathema to purity rituals requiring the purified corpse to be quickly consumed by vultures.

⁷⁰ Derrett, 2002. ⁷¹ Walker, 2008: 193–194.



Figure 3 Anonymous, *Simurgh*, from the *Manafi al-Hayawan* by Jabril ibn Bakhtishu, Maragheh, Iran, c. 1297–1300. Pierpont Morgan Library. MS M.500, fol. 55r

manuscript of the ninth-century physician ibn Bakhtishu's *The Usefulness of Animals* (*Manafi al-Hayawan*), produced around 1297. [Figure 3] Its resemblance to the Fenghuang reflects transfer of the form not only to Central Asia following the Mongol conquests, but also contemporaneously in the Late Roman Empire – neither Firdausi nor Attar would likely have visualized this representation. This form soon proliferated in Central Asian painting, in independent images as well as in paintings where narratively it had no obvious place, as in the representation of Plato at the Organ. Similarly, many editions of the *Shahnameh* frame the largely pre-Islamic content with frontispieces of the *mi'raj* and of Bilqis and Solomon, always under a Simurgh. Although Firdausi's bird appears as a mythological figure, its inclusion in association with Solomon visually quotes Attar's suggestion that the Simurgh appears as Solomon, and the seekers as mere ants before him.⁷² [Plate 6]

The bird remains the same, regardless of how spiritual its depiction in the text. By the thirteenth century, an educated reader would experience

⁷² Attar, 1984: 52.

the Simurgh in the plurality of its guises. The representation of the Simurgh does not aim for historical authenticity, but for the accretion of meanings underlying a consistent iconography. In this unique double-folio frontispiece of the courts of Solomon and Bilqis, not only does a Simurgh fly above Solomon, but it fights with a dragon. Although the meanings of such conflicts changed in China, and there is no reason to assume that visual associations from one culture would transfer with the image, such scenes of conflict between the Fenghuang and other mythical creatures were common, including associations with the male/creative and female/destructive forces of the universe (*yin/yang*), the cardinal directions, and the empress (bird) and emperor (dragon). The association of the dragon with evil by Qazvini (d. 1283), author of *Wonders of Creation* (*Aja'ib al-Makhluqat*), suggests a more local meaning.⁷³ Similarly, in Fakhr al-Gurgani's eleventh-century epic romance *Vis and Ramin*, "the sun is delivered from the dragon."⁷⁴ In the context of the *Shahnameh*, the fight between the Simurgh and the dragon foreshadows the heroic defeat of dragons, further associating the rule of mythological and contemporary Persian kings with the just rule of Solomon.

This layering underscores the limitations of understanding painting in isolation from the intertextual literary-perceptual-spiritual system embodied in poetry, music, and image. The facile assertion of an Islamic image prohibition amplifies Christian oculocentrism through an insistence on distinct sensory categories. It persists because of a modern preference for demonstrative prose over poetry as the proper space of analytical expression, and a preference for extrinsic over intrinsic mimesis as the primary vehicle of representation. Rather, the interplay of multiple poetic texts informs the meanings that disappear and accrue to a visual symbol such as the Simurgh as it migrates across times and places. As Chad Kia points out, the frequent inclusion of extra-textual images in paintings renders the visual field part of a broader intertextual discourse.⁷⁵ Madhu Khazanad's inclusion of the Simurgh obliquely represents the presence of the divine in the work, through a long sequence of sophisticated allusion.

If we imprison our questions within the paradigm of visual art, we ignore much of premodern Islamic perceptual culture. Rather, a method invested in the multiple media and genres of the past filtering to us through the veils of time informs the kinds of questions and frameworks through which we can understand the culture they construe. Our disciplinary distinctions recede, enabling a complex nexus of perception to reveal itself.

⁷³ Ettinghausen, 1971: 72. ⁷⁴ Kuehn, 2011: 195. ⁷⁵ Kia, 2006.

Thus discourses between philosophy, music, and poetry add nuance to discussions of the image beyond the blinkered question of permissibility. The tradition of music in Islam developed in concert with the discursive procedures defining juridical Islam during the ninth and tenth centuries and established the basic codes through which mimetic representation in its multiple forms – poetic, calligraphic, visual, musical, architectural, and cosmological – circulated. Within this mimetic panoply, the image was not banned but marginal. When visual practices increased following the thirteenth-century Mongol invasions, they encountered relatively little legal resistance. The sophisticated development of visual representation in post-Timurid courts suggests that al-Nawawi may have responded to an increasing practice, but the implementation of his *fatwa* against painting was limited. Rather, the high cost of paintings, combined with the unimportance of the image in Islamic ritual, led to its paucity in everyday Muslim life. Nonetheless, images functioned as a religious trope in poetry. What Hamid Dabashi refers to as “repressed visuality verbalized in the medieval text” may suggest less a psychoanalytic repression essential to Islam than the material conditions in which the sonic, oral, and verbal culture embodied in poetry and music circulated more inexpensively, and thus more readily, than painting.⁷⁶ Visual art was just not that important.

The problem with understanding a culture different from our own is that its answers rarely match our questions. This difference belongs not only to space, culture, or religion, but to time: across the course of history, all of us moderns, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, become foreign to Islam’s pasts. As Emmanuel Levinas points out, often the expressions of the culture of an Other can, at best, enter into a conversation with a culture we define as our own, thereby producing an ethical relationship, despite the inalienable boundaries produced between the analyst and the analysand. “To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression ... It is therefore to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I ... this also means: to be taught.”⁷⁷ If we are to understand the perceptual culture of Islam, we cannot rely on the paradigm of art or the backdrop of prohibition. We must instead learn to see with the ear and recognize with the heart.

⁷⁶ Dabashi, 2003: 965. ⁷⁷ Levinas, 1969: 51.

If ‘art’ designates a category of objects, then the Quran says nothing about art. Yet to delineate ‘art’ through modern concepts limits our understanding of the past. While the Quran does not discuss painting or sculpture, many of its passages address concepts central to art: sensory appreciation; materiality; value; and representation of the divine. Although the Quran is often conceived as the foundation of Islamic law, only around 500 of its 6,236 verses are consulted for jurisprudence.¹ That leaves 5,726 verses informing otherwise. For the Quran is not only a book consulted for instructions about how to live Islamically. Rather, its recitation brings to life the sonic presence of the divine word. It does not simply describe the sensory relationships between the human, the world, and the divine, it activates them. It has everything to do with art – perhaps because it has nothing to say about it.

A secular art-historical method foregrounds the Quran as an object: stylistically, medially, and paleographically. Yet the mythology of its emergence and its history as an expression of faith and identity are central to its engagement with perceptual culture. These, in turn, are indivisible from its historical emergence in the world of late antiquity, from which it inherited premises about perception and mimesis.

The Quran is not simply a book or a scripture. Within a spiritual framework, it clarifies the divine for the world. It embodies multiple simultaneous states of being as a physical book, the concept of the book, and the word of God translated for humankind. It was not only read, but frequently memorized, making each passage continually available. This is reflected in the ubiquitous references to it woven through a vast array of literary texts, images, objects, architecture, and speech. Permeating everyday life, the Quran functions as a lens for experience. It offers two paths to understanding the Islam in Islamic art: through its own ontology traversing object, text, and sound; and in its statements about the world our senses inhabit.

4.1 Perception and the Quran

When my grandfather first held me as a newborn, he whispered in my ear, “There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his prophet.” While other practices are recommended for Muslims, this utterance suffices to make one Muslim.² Muhammad’s prophecy is based on the revelation to him of the Quran, which articulates the divine for human comprehension.

The relationship between man and the divine established through this prophecy contrasts with that in Christianity. Christians recognize Jesus himself as divine. This divinity enabled him to perform miracles. Although the Bible is often cited as the ‘word of God,’ the history of its compilation by Church fathers from statements of witness gives it a worldly derivation. In contrast, in Islam, the life of the Prophet is exemplary, as his human perfection enabled his divine favor. But he is emphatically purely human. Only God is divine, and the Quran, as God’s speech that Muhammad was inspired to articulate, exposes this divinity. But what is the Quran?

Theologians debated the ontology of the Quran as the speech of God in the early ninth century. Debates featured several conundra: if the Quran is speech crafted for humans, it is not eternal; if it expresses thought, then God is conceived with human attributes rather than as absolutely divine; if there is a gap of ‘meaning’ between essence and expression, then God becomes attributed with thought and not only has a human attribute, but is not eternally self-identical.³ The Mu’tazila held that as the speech of God, the Quran could not be co-eternal with God, and thus was created. In contrast, ibn Hanbal asserted the absolute literalism of the Quran, including human attributes of God mentioned in it, such as a face or a hand.⁴ In the formulation by the theologian Abu al-Hasan al-Ash’ari (d. 936), which became the basis of dominant Sunni dogma regarding the relationship between the Quran and its maker, “God’s eternal speech is not God, nor something other than God; God is not His speech, nor something other

² The phrase used in this non-universal but common initiation is the first of the normative practices often described as the ‘five pillars’ of Islam. Scattered in the Quran, these practices are listed in the *Hadith* of Gabriel cited in early compilations. The first practice is the *shahada*, the statement of witnessing quoted here and used in the call to prayer (*adhan*), to which Shi’a Muslims add a phrase meaning “and ‘Ali is his regent (*wali*).” The ‘pillars’ also include: regular ritual prayer (*salah*) (at five prescribed times of day for Sunni, three for Shi’a Muslims); alms (*zakah*); fasting from sunup to sundown during the month of Ramadan; and performing the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) once in a lifetime, if one has the means. Followers of the Sunni legal school of ibn Hanbal (780–855 CE) add struggle (*jihad*), which can be understood as internal struggle or as holy war. Isma’ili Shi’a Muslims also add purity.

³ Larkin, 1988: 38. ⁴ Martin, 2002.

than his speech.”⁵ Faith, then, lies in accepting a logical contradiction equivalent to that of the Nicene Creed, a fourth-century Christian ecclesiastical declaration establishing the consubstantiality of Jesus with God.

Unlike in the Christian tradition, where representation of God was discussed primarily in visual terms, in Islam the issue of the representation of God addresses the role of text as the articulation of God – a making present in sound (and/or letters as representations of sound) rather than in visual form. Thereby implicated in a logocentric paradigm preferring speech to writing – God made present through the spoken articulation of the word and its perpetual re-articulation through text – the Quran embodies an earthly reflection of God. The Quran becomes a text that, with God as its omnipresent/absent author, sonically gives presence to the perpetual divine.⁶

The sound of the Quran reenacts the divine utterance that transformed Muhammad into a prophet. In listening to the Quran, we receive the same blessing as he did. The reception of revelation is an auditory process, embodied in the use of the Arabic word *sama* (audition) – encompassing both hearing and understanding.⁷ One *Hadith* claims that the Prophet said that the Quran should be recited with the tunes of the Arabs, not with those of other peoples. The sound of recitation thus conveys both linguistic and cultural implications.⁸ Cantillation is described through two aspects: a steady even chant without flourishes (*tertil*); and the suggestion of musical ornamentation that emerges from the text’s intrinsic rhythmic qualities (*tevcid*). Traditional Quranic recitation is not accompanied by notation or instrumentation and is never considered as music. But as Nina Ergin points out:

Not unlike a musician, a skilled reciter uses such effects as extension of phonemes, nasalization, pauses, and repetition in a way that will emphasize specific passages, suggest multiple meanings, and increase dramatic tension. Thus the reciter enhances the listeners’ emotional participation in the text-as-event and involves them affectively, intellectually, and spiritually. The effects of recitation on the listeners can be classified into a variety of responses: quiet weeping is even mentioned in the Quran itself as an appropriate response.⁹

⁵ Peters, 1976: 332; Larkin, 1988: 44.

⁶ The word ‘logocentric’ refers here to Jacques Derrida’s critique of Western philosophy, which he interprets as relying on a deceptive equivalence between binary pairs, initiated in the preference for presence over absence, and thus speech over writing. The analytic method he develops, called deconstruction, relies on the articulation and analysis of the otherwise unarticulated gap (called a supplement or a trace) between these pairs.

⁷ Ergin, 2008: 212. ⁸ al-Faruqi, 1982: 10. ⁹ Ergin, 2008: 212.

Distinct from the hermeneutics of scripture, a decipherable text holding doctrinal truth, the Quran functions as sound producing an emotive response in the believer.¹⁰ Michael Sells describes this combination of meaning with evocative sound as a “sound figure, a sound-complex that picks up semantic, emotive, and gender associations or ‘charges’ through its deployment within the verse.”¹¹ Similarly, Arkoun describes this ritual reenactment:

Quranic time is fully existential time in duration, chronology and spirituality. Every instant lived through is filled with the presence of the God who speaks, judges and acts in the Quran, and is then reactivated in the ‘heart’ of every believer as he performs his daily religious practices, meditation, memorization (*dhikr*) of the History of Salvation and liturgical recitation of the revealed Word, as well as his ethical and legal conduct in accordance with the normative standards (*ahkam*) laid down by God.¹²

Within the oral context in which the practice of recitation recorded the Quranic revelation, memorized text was not in a sequence, as in a written book. It functions as a simultaneous surface from which the mind of the memorizer (*hafiz*) can choose as needed, making connections with other modes of memory including the personal and the cultural. A memorized text, after all, exists not outside the individual but within the layered perpetual space of sentient perception engaging with all experiences inhabiting the same mind.¹³

The Quran can thus be understood less as a book than as a sonic image of the divine continually present in all its parts. This presence precedes its analytical or linguistic content. The Quran declares itself as the re-presentation of the “preserved tablet” (*al-lawh*) kept within the divine sphere (Q85:22). This image unfurls temporally in the act of its articulation. Faith emerges not in affirmation or obedience to meaning, but in sensory recognition of this sound image. The Quran indicates this sense as unique to believers:

[Prophet], when you recite the Quran, We put an invisible barrier between you and those who do not believe in the life to come. We have put covers on their hearts that prevent them from understanding it, and heaviness in their ears. When you mention your Lord in the Quran, and Him alone, they turn their backs and run away. (Q45–46)¹⁴

¹⁰ Martin, 1982. ¹¹ Sells, 1993. ¹² Arkoun, 2002: 91. ¹³ Arkoun, 2002: 48, 83.

¹⁴ Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 178. This notion of eyes without sight and ears without hearing resembles the reference to those who “have eyes but are blind, who have ears but are deaf” in the biblical book of Isaiah (43:8).

For a Muslim, the sound of Quranic recitation in Arabic cannot be replicated in any other language; its truth emerges perceptually, not semantically.¹⁵ This limits the efficacy of translation. When the Quran is used in a meditative or talismanic manner, whether through chants, calligraphy, or by drinking water infused with ink washed from its inscription, it is textual presence rather than hermeneutic content that empowers the book.¹⁶

Coextensive with its author, divine speech is the infinitely reproducible and immutable copy of an inaccessible heavenly original. Its meaning depends not simply on hermeneutics, but the faithful believer's perception of God through divine text. This text is embodied not only in the Quran, but in all of creation – the universe we inhabit is also the sacred text, an earthly mirror of the divine tablet. The Quran indicates a primordial link between creation and revelation through the voice of the angel (identified as Gabriel in early biographies of the Prophet): “Read! In the name of your Lord who created: He created man from a clinging form. Read! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One who taught by the pen” (Q96:1–4).¹⁷ Form endows creation with physicality much as recitation embodies the word. Although the Quran describes itself as written through the pen, the dual meaning of the imperative *ikra*’ as ‘read’ and ‘recite’ is underscored in histories of the Prophet emphasizing his illiteracy as part of his humble origins as well as proof of the miraculous origins of the divine text. Only through perception, rather than a fixed essence, can the Quran function simultaneously as book, text, speech, and representation. Never embodying any single aspect, each state of the Quran perpetually differs from another, producing an ontological bridge without origin between the sensible world of the human and the supra-sensory world of the divine. The slippage between meanings enables the supplement of faith that supersedes the logical structure of an empirical hermeneutic episteme.¹⁸ We cannot know the Quran through modern scientific interpretation, yet to understand perceptual culture, we must recognize its role in informing how Muslims engage with the world and its representation.

The Quran accounts for this internalized perceptual mode by repeatedly challenging even the most skilled of poets to create a passage comparable in beauty to even its shortest section (Q2:23–24, 10:37–38, 11:13, 17:88). Used as proof of the prophecy during the first centuries of Islam, this discourse of Quranic inimitability (*i’jaz*) implicates the relationship between the ethereal world of God and the material world of humankind doubly:

¹⁵ McAuliffe, 2006: 6. ¹⁶ O’Connor, 2001; Handloff, 1982: 186.

¹⁷ Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 428. ¹⁸ Spivak, 1997: 62–64.

through the ahistorical vehicle of the Quran, homogeneous across time in all its manifestations as tablet/book or text/speech, and through prophecy at the specific moment of revelation. The uniqueness of the Quran emerges through its transcendence of the rational relationship between sign and knowledge via embodied perception. The perceptual efficacy of the Quran is constant across the multitude of its interpretations.¹⁹

Enjoining believers to intuit its divinity, the Quran declares the incapacity of human rational interpretation to fully comprehend its meaning:

Some of its verses are definite/clear/decisive/fundamental (*muhakhama*) in meaning – these are the mother (substance/cornerstone) of the Scripture – and others are ambiguous/allegorical (*mutashabiha*). The perverse at heart eagerly pursue the ambiguous in their attempt to make trouble and to pin down a specific meaning of their own: only God knows the true meaning. Those firmly grounded in knowledge say, “We believe in it: it is all from our Lord” – only those with real perception will take heed. (Q3:7)²⁰

No hermeneutic can reveal truth, reserved for God. If truth exists but is unattainable, then positive interpretation of the Quran becomes impossible and knowledge can only function within the fluidity of discourse. No interpretation except that of the unknowable divine can suffice. On the one hand, this suggests that a positive truth exists as an ultimate origin, such that even if we cannot solve the puzzle of allegory, truth is ontologically knowable. On the other, as the author – God – manifests in creation, and communicates linguistically only in the Quran itself, this truth also remains infinitely ambiguous. The problem for a positive interpretation of the Quran is that this opposition necessarily eludes human solution. Instead, it produces a perpetual supplementation of meaning that simultaneously brings to mind the Derridian notions of *différance* (the gap in value between the pairs of a binary which serves as a supplement – an addition that augments despite the absence of a lack) and the impossibility of an *hors-texte* (the idea that any text is bound within an infinite network of texts, thus excluding the possibility of interpretive exteriority).²¹ Rooted in the transcendental signified, the Quran refuses to be pinned down through any positive and stable exegesis. Citing the verse, “Say [Prophet], ‘If the whole ocean were ink for writing the words of my Lord, it would run dry before those words were exhausted’ – even if We were to add another ocean

¹⁹ Reynolds, 2008: 2–3.

²⁰ Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 34. Parenthetical alternative translations in this passage have been chosen from Asad, 1980; Khan and al-Hilali, 2009; Pickthall, Pickthall, 1999; Shakir, 1999; Ali, 1995.

²¹ Derrida, 1981: 158.

to it,” ibn Arabi describes the Quran as always already containing an infinity of interpretations (Q18:109).²² By barring human (as opposed to divine) access to the gap between the definite and the indefinite – in effect the knowable and the unknowable, or the definable and the ineffable – this passage undermines the possibility of any fixed interpretation of Islam.

Understanding the Quran thus requires not simply rational exegesis, but also deeply subjective perceptual apprehension. Although the imitability of *i’jaz* is based on the rational qualitative study of literature, the capacity for perception of *i’jaz* also exceeds and precedes any rational standards. The eleventh-century scholar al-Jurjani emphasizes that the Quran is not perceived through the eyes or ears, but directly penetrates and impresses the heart. Reflecting on the supreme composition, eloquence, and imagery of the Quran, he comments on the power of simile to cause pleasure by bringing forward the unseen through comparison. He holds this true not only for the Quran, but also for a beautiful face or garden. Through the virtue or merit (*fadila*) they evoke, such elements become universal and thus subject to analysis. Similarly, his contemporary al-Hujwiri describes traditions of those surrounding the Prophet as weeping and swooning upon hearing his prayers, of angels dying from hearing the verses, and an inability to even complete reading the book because of its beauty.²³

Writing within this tradition, the modern Salafi thinker Seyyid Qutb (1906–1966) understands aesthetics as central to Islam:

We realize that the Quranic expression united the aim of religion with the artistic aim in every scene presented in the Quran. We come to realize that the splendor of the Quranic style is the influential instrument in the Quran, reforming the human soul and giving it the Islamic character ... Religion and aesthetics are twin in the human soul.²⁴

He suggests that the concern over images is not about pictures so much as the mentality of affiliating representation (*tasawwur*) with “mere Western images,” a “translated mentality” from which he seeks to liberate Muslims. From a more historicist perspective, Arkoun’s recognition of the similarity between the discourse on *i’jaz* and the oppositions of form/content and literal/figurative meaning in Aristotelian rhetoric underscore the inward aspect of mimesis taken as normative in the Quranic description and cultural understanding of *i’jaz*.²⁵

²² Almond, 2003; Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 190.

²³ al-Hujwiri, 1959: 395.

²⁴ Khatab, 2006: 95.

²⁵ Vilchez, 2017: 53 n. 82, 51 n. 74.

This practice of apprehension contrasts with both Baumgarten's hierarchy between logical and sensory knowledge and the Kantian norms central to Western art history. Kant postulates that the rational subject must act from a position of disinterest to justify his subjectivity as universal. In contrast, the Islamic subject experiences the universality of the divine through a deeply and necessarily interested subjectivity intrinsic to divine, and therefore universal, truth.

This very different notion of representation can lead to confusion. From a position that normalizes the outward Western image, Dabashi argues that the preference for representing God in word rather than in image collapses the sign into the signifier, making the unrepresentability of God into a pathology.²⁶ He asserts that the absence of the *visible* also occludes the *visual*, rendering Islam-as-iconoclastic as essential to the Quran and thereby analytically solving the paradox of Islamic iconoclasm, whereby images are essentially forbidden without any explicit dogma. Yet the image in the Quran is neither outward nor universal; it is inward and personal. The divine thus infuses the human through Quranic sound, as well as in the apprehension of creation (the physical world that we inhabit) as divine signs identical with the Quran.

The Quran recognizes representation as an imperfect yet necessary interface between the divine and the human. To communicate with humanity, the Quran needs the mundane medium of language. The qualities of language inherently differ from the unitary nature of God because of the separation between form (signifier) and content (signified). The distance between the absolute idea of the signified and its imperfect rendition in the signifier introduces a realm of play in which style emerges: language enables multiple ways of saying the same thing, a thing that can only be absolute in the unitary realm of the monotheistic divinity. Arabic language, and through it stylistics, must precede the Quran for it to be understood. Yet as a language communicating divinity, it must always already exceed the stylistics on which it depends. Quranic text can be understood as an external reflection of the internal speech of God, reflecting an aspect of craft, which involves expressive choices for the communication of meaning to a recipient. Al-Jurjani described this process as involving *taswir* – the same word commonly used for a likeness, as in an image – that creates a particular form or shape in a given medium.²⁷ Representation emerges as a function of language rather than visuality.

²⁶ Dabashi, 2011. ²⁷ Larkin, 1988: 41; Elias, 2012: 28.

Understood as a representation in the medium of human language, the Quran exists in its full and eternal plenitude only at the level of the Tablet, also called the ‘mother of the Book’ and kept by God (Q13:38).²⁸ Fixity resides in this original heavenly inscription of the Book, but reception – even that of its translation into words to communicate with humanity – can never function without being pierced by individual perception.

The unique receptive internalization of the Quran reflects the unparalleled ontology of its author. Where Foucault offers the notion of an author as a categorical function, here neither author nor text exceeds the other. Far from the ‘dead’ author proposed by Roland Barthes, this author is omnipresent.²⁹ The text is also co-eternal with creation, and thus with the world itself. The absence and presence of the author are one. In Ash’ari Sunni dogma, divine thought and speech are indistinguishable; the Quran is thus simply speech and coextensive with God. Aesthetically, it has style, but without an author to whom intentionality can be attributed. As the standard of stylistics that cannot itself be subject to worldly measure, the quality of style depends on reception rather than on production.

The paradox of the authorless text that is simultaneously a copy and coextensive with its original can be considered by analogy with the paradoxes surrounding the photograph as theorized by Barthes. He points out that, unlike a sign distinguishing signifier and signified, the photograph announces itself through its medium as a complete surface that records absolute presence mechanically.³⁰ On this surface, we can seek that which can be organized iconographically, which gives signs of certain factual representations, a level of analysis that Barthes associates with what he names the *studium*. If we use the photograph as a metaphor for the way in which the Quran conveys its message as a flat surface, this *studium* would correspond with the definite (*muhakhama*) passages. Similarly, as the German-Jewish-born theologian Mohammed Asad (1900–1992) explains, “the philologists and jurists describe as *nass* – namely, ordinances or statements which are self-evident (*zahir*) by virtue of their wording.”³¹ One might think of the apparently redundant and at times contradictory messages of the Quran that nonetheless simultaneously maintain meaning as producing a surface of multiple exposures which still retain the flatness and absolute indexicality of the photograph. Just as a multi-exposure photograph simultaneously shows and blurs its subject, this simultaneity

²⁸ Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 154. ²⁹ Gallop, 2011. ³⁰ Barthes, 1981: 40–45.

³¹ Asad, 1980: 66.

of the Quranic text limits hermeneutic interpretation: humanity can never resolve the boundary between the definite and the indefinite.

Within this pseudo-photographic textual surface functioning as a *studium* – a seeming backdrop of ‘average effects’ from a set of photographs or, in this case, divine utterances – understanding of the Quran might be compared to Barthes’ *punctum*, a detail or moment in the image which, in affecting the observer, affects the passage of a void such that the observer (or reader) moves beyond oppositions such as truth or falsity, love or indifference, knowledge or ignorance, into a realm penetrated by understanding, love, and immediacy.³² Like Barthes’ photograph, the Quran offers a flat surface of equally valid meaning selectively enacted by the recipient in the moment a passage hits home, conveying meaning through insight exceeding hermeneutic analysis.

Rather than indicating the permissibility or prohibition of the image, the Quran frequently delineates the parameters of human apprehension of the divine through material perception. The emphasis is less on the object, or even on visibility, than on the perceptual act. In this understanding, the limits of human sight addressed by a physical image do not set the boundaries of perception. Rather, vision functions among multiple modes of perception within which faith enables awareness of God. This engenders not an immaterial, iconoclastic, or aniconic religion, but one in which the relation to materiality mediating between the sacred, the mundane, and the profane is performative rather than representational.³³ Meaning emerges as a function of reception at least as much as from the context of production and intentionality of human authorship emphasized in the empiricist episteme of art history. Ibn Arabi expresses this in describing visual perception as “a meaning that God creates in the eye according to what the viewer intends to see of visible things.”³⁴ What matters is not the object, but its internalization. Beauty cannot be objective, because it is constituted by interest. Art history derived from Kantian aesthetics is useless in this context.

This emphasis on perception over analytical meaning complements the Quranic emphasis on the heart, before the eyes and ears, as the primary sensory organ hindered in disbelievers, unable to “believe in the unseen”: “As for those who disbelieve, it makes no difference whether you warn them or not: they will not believe. God has sealed their hearts and their ears, and their eyes are covered” (Q2:6–7).³⁵ Likewise, when verifying the

³² Barthes, 1981: 25. ³³ Elias, 2012: 102. ³⁴ Akkach, 2005: 79.

³⁵ Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 5.

Prophet's vision of the miraculous night journey from Mecca to the "farthest place of worship" (*isra*), and the subsequent *mi'raj*, the Quran calls upon the heart to bear witness for the eyes, pointing out that the Prophet's "own heart did not distort what he saw" (Q53: 11).³⁶ This perception does not go against either the law of Islam or against the order of the senses, but supplements them in transcending the apparent rules of the material world.

The primacy of the heart is clearly expressed in one of the earliest treatises to describe the Sufi stations. Based on Quranic interpretation, the *Treatise on the Heart* (*Bayan al-Farq*) by the ascetic al-Hakim al-Tirmidi (d. c.932) describes the self (*nafs*) through a cosmology of the heart, described as concentric spheres of: the breast (*sadr*), the abode of the light of Islam and repository of the knowledge required for religious practice and law; the heart (*qalb*), abode of faith and inner knowledge of reality granted by God; the inner heart (*fu'ad*), abode of the light of gnosis; and intellect (*lubb*), abode of the light of unification (*tawhid*) with God. Each sphere also serves as a station on the Sufi path. He begins by defining this comprehensive heart as an eye:

The word 'heart' is similar to the word 'eye' since 'eye' includes [in its meaning] that which lies between the two eyelashes, such as the white and black [parts] of the eye, the pupil, and the light within the pupil. Each of these entities has a separate nature and a meaning different from that of the others. Nevertheless, some of them assist some of the others ... The heart proper (*qalb*) ... is like the black of the eye within the eye, whereas the breast is like the white. The heart is also like the city of Mecca inside the sacred area ... like the place of the wick of the lamp, or the house within the homestead or the almond inside the outer covering.³⁷

For him, the Quran shows that blindness and sight "are attributes of the heart and not of the breast."³⁸ Defining these sensory organs through analogy with place, object, and seed, he suggests a worldview in which the human merges with creation, categorized not through physicality but through function. Like Jorge Luis Borges' so-called Chinese Encyclopedia referenced by Foucault, his description breaks "up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things ... to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other."³⁹ Applied to this worldview, the categories with which we moderns observe the world fall into disarray.

³⁶ Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 347.

³⁷ Honerkamp, 2009: 11–13.

³⁸ Honerkamp, 2009: 20.

³⁹ Foucault, 1994: xv.

What can 'art' mean in a culture where the primary organ of perception is not the eye or the ears, but the heart? It requires a shift from the visible to the sensible, in which attention is directed not outwardly toward the object, but inwardly, within the heart. This shift – from the eye as an organ of (potentially rational) verification to the heart as one of (necessarily perceptual) validation shifts the aesthetic from one located between a disinterested subject and object toward an aesthetic located between an interested subject and an object made malleable through the performance of perception.

The Quran scarcely differentiates between material and immaterial perception: external receptors, the eyes and ears, function indivisibly with the heart, the internal sensory organ. This enables a heart-perception of the unseen that unbalances and confuses the distinction of the senses. Whereas a visually mimetic model of representation requires light to expose material reality, in the Quran light can simultaneously show and blind, sometimes at the same time.

God is the Light of the heavens and earth. His Light is like this: there is a niche, and in it a lamp, the lamp inside a glass, a glass like a glittering star, fuelled from a blessed olive tree from neither east nor west, whose oil almost gives light even when no fire touches it – light upon light – God guides whoever He will to his Light; God draws such comparisons for people; God has full knowledge of everything – shining out in houses of worship. (Q24: 35–36).⁴⁰

The verse constructs a simile through which the perception of an immaterial God must depend on the mediation of the visible ensconced within layers simultaneously suggesting barriers and transparency, each perpetually differing to the other. Although suggesting materiality through the lamp and implying the sense of vision through the provision of light, neither is fully realized. The textual image plays between the presence and absence of glass and light, with matter that is permeable and oil that burns without fire. In contrast to mundane vision, where materiality and luminosity are interdependent, in God's unity they become indissoluble. Yet the light cannot function solely through its own presence: it relies on the vehicle, the lamp, just as the passage relies on the simile of the lamp, also associated with the Prophet Muhammad (Q33:45–46). Unlike with material vision, in which light on an object enables perception, in the light verse, the likeness of light (not light itself) representing God defers presence, always pointing toward the Prophet pointing toward revelation pointing toward the Tablet pointing toward the Divine.

⁴⁰ Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 223; Böwering, 2001: 116.

The Quran also suggests that this light can withdraw. For those who pretend to believe but lack faith:

God is mocking them, and allowing them more slack to wander blindly in their insolence ... They are like people who [labor to] kindle a fire: when it lights up everything around them, God takes away all their light, leaving them in utter darkness, unable to see – deaf, dumb, and blind: they will never return. Or [like people who, under] a cloudburst from the sky, with its darkness, thunder, and lightning, put their fingers into their ears to keep out the thunderclaps for fear of death – God surrounds the disbelievers. The lightning almost snatches away their sight: whenever it flashes on them they walk on and when darkness falls around them they stand still. (Q 2:15–20)⁴¹

The withdrawal of light causes the blindness against which the fact of sight becomes perceptible – like the flash, even, of a photograph. For this lightning is neither simply a negative force in its blinding, nor the lack of light indicated for disbelievers:

But the deeds of disbelievers are like a mirage in a desert: the thirsty person thinks there will be water but, when he gets there, he finds it is nothing. There he finds only God, who pays him his account in full – God is swift in reckoning. Or like shadows in a deep sea covered by waves upon waves, with clouds above – layer upon layer of darkness – if he holds out his hand, he is scarcely able to see it. The one to whom God gives no light has no light at all. (Q 24:39–40)⁴²

Lightning provides an ambivalent moment of grace between enlightenment and destructive darkness. The type of physical light on which visual perception depends also can potentially blind and/or burn, and vice versa. Although only an indicator of the divine Real, this world depends on physicality, and sight becomes the dominant metaphor for comprehension of the divine signs implicit through all creation.

Suhrawardi uses the Quranic discourse of lightning to plead against the domination of rationalism in the discourse of truth. He relates a parable about a group of Sufis, one of whom asks for proof of the creator's existence. One says, "Morning renders the lamp unnecessary," while another says, "One who seeks God through logical proof is like someone searching for the sun with a lamp." Building on these insights, Suhrawardi underscores the relative value of experimental knowledge in comparison with the vision of the heart.

The masters of epistemological methodology hold as an accepted truth and are unanimously agreed that in the next world God may create for his servants a power

⁴¹ Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 6–7. ⁴² Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 223.

of perception in their visual faculty so that they may see him directly. Reason, proof and instruction are of no consideration in the eyes of the People of Truth ... It is for this reason that Umar said, "My heart saw the Lord."⁴³

Like Suhrawardi, ibn Arabi employs lightning as a metaphor for insight, uprooting him from his native Andalusia and leading him to journey east.

He saw the lightning flash
and yearned toward the East.
If it had flashed in the West,
west he would have turned.

I burn for the lightning
and its flash,
not for this or that
some piece of ground.

The East Wind told me
a tradition about them, from
the wreck of my heart,
from ecstasy, sorrow, my disarray,

This lightning becomes the balm for all that he sought in activities such as drinking, studying, and worldly love.

From drunkenness, reason,
longing, the wound of love,
from tears, my eyelids,
the fire, my heart.

Through this lightning, he discovers that the object of desire is God,
located "between your ribs" – in the heart.

He whom you desire
is between your ribs,
turned side to side
in the heat of your sigh.

I told them to tell him
he's the one
who kindled the fire
blazing in my heart.

It is extinguished only
in our coming together.

⁴³ Suhrawardi, 1982: 90.

If it burns out of control,
who can be blamed for loving?⁴⁴

Ibn Arabi thus describes Quranic lightning as simultaneously enlightening and destroying the seeker in love with God. As in the Platonic tradition, the boundary between *eros* and *agapé* remains ambiguous, as the analogy for (longing for) disembodied annihilation in the divine hinges on the bodily experience of longing, desire, and transcendence experienced through the erotic. Thus, in contrast with dominant interpretations in Christianity, sexuality comes to be interpreted not through a paradigm of sin so much as through the *pharmakon* of transgression and transcendence.

In a broader framework, the Quran indicates materiality as a structure through which to comprehend essential immateriality. The materiality of the world, its practical and its sensual presence, provides a vital backbone to both the pragmatic instructions in the Quran, such as the distribution of wealth, alms, and inheritance, and the real and metaphysical utility of objects and creation: “The love of desirable things is made alluring for men – women, children, gold and silver treasures piled up high, horses with fine markings, livestock, and farmland – these may be the joys of this life, but God has the best place to return to” (Q3:14).⁴⁵ The passage does not disparage love of wealth so much as recognize its worldly transience in contradistinction to the immaterial offered by the afterlife. The material world cannot be disassociated from creation, thus requiring materiality for worship: religion cannot function in pure immateriality, since the distinction between humankind and the divine relies on matter.

Yet Islamic art history has often implied that luxury goods are inherently irreligious. One of its first experts, Henri-Michel Lavoix, asserted this in saying:

The truth is that Muslims do not conform their habits and their tastes to the law of the prophet except where it does not encounter excessive resistance to their passions and pleasures ... One reads in the Quran: “Certainly the fire of hell will thunder like the roar of camels in the stomach of someone who drinks from golden or silver chalices.”⁴⁶

While avoiding any similarly laughable misquotations, Ernst Grube and Oleg Grabar likewise declare religious knowledge inaccessible from the

⁴⁴ Sells, 2008: 8–9. ⁴⁵ Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 34. ⁴⁶ Lavoix, 1875: 100.

secular sphere, and associate luxury goods with courtly culture devoid of religion.⁴⁷

The Quran underscores the importance of nature as an adornment (*zukhruf*) of earth through which humanity becomes able to appreciate God (Q10:24). Yet the term also serves as a warning against extensive luxury (Q43:33–35). As the word moved beyond its Quranic usage, it came to be used for painted adornment, beautiful but deceptive words, the colors of plants, and the full beauty of a thing.⁴⁸ For example, Jafer Agha, biographer of the Ottoman architect Mehmet Agha (1540–1617), justifies the embellishment of the Kaaba with the following quatrain:

Although there is a world in the face of the beloved,
There is another world in the garment of the desired one.
Beauties are glorified by sumptuous and ornamented garments.
They wish to reveal themselves in a different mode.⁴⁹

Jafer transforms gold from extravagance into sumptuous adornment of the divine. Sensory pleasures inform love of the divine because transcendence requires materiality.

The importance of adornment is perhaps nowhere more explicit than in the Quran's description of King Solomon using his palatial raiment to display his wisdom and convert Bilqis:

And [We subjected] the wind for Solomon. Its outward journey took a month, and its return journey likewise. We made a fountain of molten brass flow for him, and some of the jinn worked under his control with his Lord's permission. If one of them deviated from Our command, We let him taste the suffering of the blazing flame. They made him whatever he wanted – palaces, statues, basins as large as water troughs, fixed cauldrons. (Q34: 12–13)⁵⁰

This palace serves as a parable using the transcendence of misrecognition as a metaphor for the recognition of truth beyond visuality. King Solomon invites the heliolatrous Bilqis to his court, modeled as a garden and thus a metaphor for heaven. She must traverse a threshold paved with glass over water in which fish swim. Fooled by the glass, she lifts her skirt to wade barefoot into the water. She discovers that she has been unable to see truth because of the misrepresentation of her own visual perception, which has similarly deceived her into being dazzled by the sun rather than worshipping

⁴⁷ Shaw, 2012: 6. ⁴⁸ Vilchez, 2017: 61–62. ⁴⁹ Crane, 1987: 55.

⁵⁰ Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 273.

the invisible God of Islam.⁵¹ As in the Platonic tradition, visibility may thus sometimes be suspect in its production/recognition of false icons, but nonetheless serves as a bridge toward recognition of the invisible divine.

The interplay between the necessity and dangers of materiality emerges in three juxtaposed parables repeated in the standard sequence of Quranic recitation: the stories of the failure of Iblis (Satan) to bow before Adam, the fall from the Garden of Eden, and the golden calf.⁵² In these passages, Iblis obeys God's commandment to worship only him, and so is alone among the angels in not bowing before the created form of Adam. He is then banished from heaven for dishonoring God's creative power. Subsequently, he tricks Adam and Eve into consciousness of materiality, causing their banishment from the garden. Their descendants worship the golden calf, neglecting the miracle of creation while worshipping ostentatious false idols. Their transgression diametrically opposes and thereby complements Iblis's refusal to bow to man. Sufi interpretations of the narrative see him not as the arch-enemy of humankind, but as subject to pity for his downfall, admiration for his principled refusal, and confident of God's ultimate mercy.⁵³ An illustration of the angels bowing before Adam as Satan walks away (at the upper right of the image) memorializes the moment in which Satan, a dark form in the background placing his finger to his lips in wonder and wearing a ring around his neck as a sign of his enslavement to God, walks away. While a later reader saw fit to deface the representation of a somewhat hermaphroditic Adam, in the original the warning against idolatry was clear enough to depict the inappropriate worship of the human form.⁵⁴ [Figure 4] Likewise, Adam and Eve, as metonyms for humankind, live through a necessary relationship with the material world bracketed by the opposing excesses of both Satan and the idolaters. Considered beyond their historical genesis as segregated parables inherited from the Abrahamic tradition, the stories become links in a discourse of materiality as the necessary substrate of divine transcendence.

⁵¹ The Quranic tale abridges longer Midrashic mythologizations of historical encounters. As Judaic and Islamic commentary interacted over time, earlier accounts of verbal competition later became increasingly sexualized. These include descriptions of the need for Bilqis to use a depilatory cream so that Solomon can show her his full power. Lassner, 1993: 20, 128–130, 136; Soucek, 1993. Valérie Gonzalez suggests that the description of the glass produces a “sort of textual ‘icon,’” which “represents” an architectural feature one can enter, made with an overall glass setting, transparent, bright, white or green, isotropic, with a perceptible linear design,” that conflates the isotropy of pattern with the deceptive nature of vision itself. Her interpretation anachronistically projects the use of pattern from later periods in Islamic history to the era of Quranic emergence, preceding both isotropic geometries and their underlying mathematical theories (discussed in chapter 8 of this book). Gonzalez, 2001: 31.

⁵² These sequences are repeated in verses 2:34–37, 51, 88–89 and 20: 88–89, 116–18.

⁵³ Boyle, 1979: 13–14. ⁵⁴ Rührdanz, 2017: 1035–1036.



Figure 4 Anonymous, *Angels Bowing before Adam*, from the *Majalis al-Ussaq* by Amir Kamil al-Din Gazurgahi, 1580. Bibliothèque National de France, Supplément Persan 1150, fol. 8v, p. 29 × 18.5 cm

This understanding of the image retreats from its physical form, the object of art history, in favor of a mediating function that the Quran indicates as part of perception, not in the representational power of the image, but in the receptive capacity of the subject. The Quran provides no guidelines for art as such because any matter, including but not limited to things we moderns understand through the rubric of art, can mediate meaning. The Quran thus informs the visual culture of Islam without necessitating the boundary between art and the rest of the world.

Rather, materialism ranges between excesses: Satan's refusal to revere creation (absolute iconoclasm); and the worship of the golden calf (idolatry). Materiality is necessary because its balanced perception enables apprehension of God.

In the creation of the heavens and earth; in the alternation of night and day; in the ships that sail the seas with goods for people; in the water which God sends down from the sky to give life to the earth when it has been barren, scattering all kinds of creatures over it; in the changing of the winds and clouds that run their appointed courses between the sky and earth: there are signs in all these for those who use their minds. Even so, there are some who choose to worship others besides God as rivals to Him, loving them with the love due to God, but the believers have greater love for God. If only the idolaters could see – as they will see when they face the torment – that all power belongs to God, and that God punishes severely. (Q 2:164–165)⁵⁵

All of creation potentially signal the divine, but apprehension of such signs depends on believers understanding their senses. Ibn Rushd interprets the similar passage “Consider, you who are able to see” (Q59:2) not as a demand to read scripture for guidance, but as a demand that believers should use their intellect to recognize the art embedded in all things and, through it, to recognize its artisan.⁵⁶ For ibn Arabi, the recognition of such similitudes (*tashbih*) shows the similarities between the unity of True Knowledge and its reflection in the multiplicity of creation, and constitutes the self-disclosure of God.⁵⁷ The image-function is not limited to the workings of the representational image in the Western tradition, and transcends the categorical distinctions of the senses in the internalized perceptual realm of the heart. This becomes articulated in the ontology of internal senses theorized by ibn Sina as the faculties of common sense, representation, imagination, and memory. By abstracting objects, these internal senses interface with the intellect, which has the capacity to evaluate them as true, pure, and good.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 18. ⁵⁶ Lerner, 2007: 270. ⁵⁷ Chittick, 1998: 13.

⁵⁸ Berlekamp, 2011: 21.

This attitude also defines the role of the artist not as excessively prideful in imitating God, but as honoring God by emulating the creative act. In discussing the names of God and the extent to which humans have the aptitude to participate in actions associated with divinity, al-Ghazali indicates that human happiness and perfection lie in the adoption of God's characteristics, which embellish the soul. Likewise, the Brethren of Purity cite a *Hadith* indicating that "God loves the artisan who seeks perfection in his art."⁵⁹ Thus like philosophy, making art uses human capacity to emulate God. Samer Akkach summarizes: "To emulate God's work in the practice of art is to imitate the patterns and qualities of the divine artefacts, for he is the best artificer, the one who knows best, the wisest, and the noblest."⁶⁰ Citing God's invitation to humanity to approach him (Q17:57), the Brethren interpret creativity as one means of seeking God.

In contrast to our modern distinction between nature and art, this understanding sees the created world also as art, different only in its divine perfection. Human emulation embodies the human striving to be like God; and its necessary imperfection reflects the state of being human. Such art is highly naturalistic, in that it models itself on what we consider as nature, the divine creation. Yet this nature is not perceived through the weak tools of our external senses, but through the relatively more accurate perception cultivated inside.

4.2 The Science of Internalized Vision

Multiple strands of literature have elaborated on the Quranic references to the heart as the primary perceiving organ. Theological discourses cultivated Muslims who understood perception not only through the outward sensory organs, but also through the heart. Poetry wove many of these interpretations into popular genres not requiring extensive study. Much as in the Christian world, painting culturally naturalized the outwardly mimetic understanding of the image, and poetry normalized a theological discourse of inward mimesis within Islamic cultures.

Early Islamic treatises expound love as a manifestation of God. Ibn Sina describes God's self-love as "the most perfect and fullest love because there is no differentiation between the divine attributes in the essence."⁶¹ This renders love the manifestation of Essence and Existence. Matter, including the human, exists to enable God's self-manifestation or theophany (*tajalli*),

⁵⁹ Akkach, 2005a: 50. ⁶⁰ Akkach, 2005a: 50. ⁶¹ Elkaisy-Freimuth, 2006: 83.

which we come to know internally through self-knowledge. Ibn Sina's thought reverberates with the Brethren of Purity's thirty-sixth epistle, *On the Essence of Love*. They defined love as the desire for unification with the object of love such that the body simply serves as a vehicle for the proximity of souls.⁶²

Ibn Sina's *Epistle on Love* (*Risale-i 'Ishq*) describes love as the motile force of the world. He explains that "every being which is determined by a design strives by nature toward its perfection,"⁶³ identified as the natural flow of the Pure Good away from the evil inherent in materiality and non-being. He explains that love is implanted in all things: in matter in its yearning toward form; in movement in its yearning toward the mover; in voluntary love yearning toward perfect love in God. Form thus represents not a thing, as in a visual image, but the efforts of matter to be. A romance is not the love of a person, but a worldly vehicle for the experience of longing for God. Considering the object that embodies matter, or the beloved who embodies love, we might conceive of love less as an emotion than as a verb.

Ibn Sina describes love, central to the existence of matter, as a part or even the cause of the existence of all things that emanates first from God to the Intellects, and then to all other beings. For him, research-oriented philosophy and internal witnessing complement each other as a means of gaining knowledge of the intelligibles. He proposes:

The purification of the rational soul through knowledge of God consists in its gaining a habitude by means of which it becomes prepared to make present all the intelligibles whenever it wishes, without the need for acquisition. At that point all the intelligibles become present to it in actuality, or in potentiality that is extremely close to actuality. The rational soul becomes a polished mirror upon which the forms of things become impressed as they are [in reality] without distortion.⁶⁴

For Ibn Sina, vision takes place when the sensory information from each eye "impresses" itself on the crystalline humor of the eye, described as "polished and luminous" like a mirror. These sensory images are in turn impressed on the "composite sense" (*hiss al-mushtarik*; translated into Latin as *sensus communis*), which is "the mental faculty which collects and records the sense-data transmitted to it by the five external senses."⁶⁵ As Priscilla Soucek explains, "the images received by the eye and the 'composite sense' are called 'impressed images' (*al-suwar al-muntabi'a*)," known in Persian as *nishan*, the common word for target and for sign.⁶⁶

⁶² Fackenheim, 1945. ⁶³ Elkaisy-Freimuth, 2006: 83. ⁶⁴ Treiger, 2012: 62.

⁶⁵ Goichon, 1938: 70; see also Beeston, 1963: 57, n19. ⁶⁶ Soucek, 1972: 14.

The association between the composite sense and the mirror comes directly from the thought of Plotinus, who likens conceptual imagination to a mirror.⁶⁷

The Brethren of Purity clearly articulate this relationship between the senses and contemplative faculty as an image:

Know that, when the imaginative faculty brings the record of sensed things to the contemplative faculty, after obtaining it from the faculty of sensation, and after the sensed things have disappeared and are no longer witnessed directly by the senses, that record remains in the thoughts of the soul as imagined immaterial images. Thus the substance of soul is, to this record pictured in it, like prime matter, and it [the record] is in that [soul] like forms [are in prime matter].⁶⁸

They then explain how a man reengages his sensory experiences after leaving a city he has visited by deploying the analogy of wax from the Platonic and Aristotelian analogy with the mind.⁶⁹

If, after the passage of time, his memories of it reoccur, that contemplation is none other than the glance of the soul onto its own essence and its imagining an image of the city. What existences it sees in it are nothing other than the forms of those existing things that are now imprinted on the substance of its soul in a way similar to the imprint of a stamp on sealing wax.⁷⁰

Similar definitions emerge in *The Book of Optics* (*Kitab al-Manazir*) by ibn al-Haytham, which offers experimental solutions to the longstanding conflict between optical theories based on intromission (the idea that light enters the eye to create the effect of vision) and extramission (the idea that a ray exits the eye to create the effect of vision). Like ibn Sina, ibn al-Haytham divides the labor of seeing into distinct physical and psychological phases. This distinction solves what was considered the central conundrum of intromission theory: how does the eye perpetually receiving information from all objects and all angles keep so much information straight?

Ibn al-Haytham develops a model of the visual cone in which only the central ray of the cone achieves clear sight; all other threads of the cone remain blurry, as in what we call peripheral vision. Ibn al-Haytham postulates that to perceive the form of an object beyond any single point informing the eye, it must move and collect data from multiple points of each object.

⁶⁷ Warren, 1966: 278 (4.3.29, 1.4.10). ⁶⁸ Walker, 2016: 129. ⁶⁹ Graves, 2018: 39.

⁷⁰ Walker, 2016: 129.

The sentient will perceive all features of the object only by discerning all the features of all its parts. That being so, the contemplation by which the true forms of visible objects are perceived is achieved both by the eye itself and by the faculty of judgment. Perception of the true forms of visible objects can therefore take place only by means of contemplation. And the contemplation by means of which the object's form is ascertained can be affected only by the eye's movement.⁷¹

This, of course, takes time. He thus distinguishes between the immediate apprehension of visual information, which he refers to as 'glancing' sight, and the processes of judgment that amount to 'contemplative' sight.

Sight ... perceives only the forms of visible objects, and each of these forms is composed of a number of particular properties and, consequently, sight perceives in each of the forms of visible objects a multitude of particular properties [which are then distinguished] in the imagination and the faculty of judgement.⁷²

The form of each part will not be ascertained, nor will all features in the object be manifest until after the eye has moved over all parts, and after the axis (or a line close to it) has passed over each of them. Moreover, it is in the nature of sight to engage in this action of contemplation, thus passing the ray's axis over all parts of the object, so that when the faculty of judgement decides to contemplate an object, the ray's axis will move over all parts of it.⁷³

For ibn al-Haytham, this glancing sight is incomplete before being processed through contemplation. Thus sensory, verifiable, experimental evidence alone does not add up to knowledge, which can only be attained through the process of judgment. All perception is instantaneous, gaining signification as it becomes composite through the internalization of judgment, and only becomes meaningful through the reflection of memory.

Both thinkers posit sight less as the apperception of an external world than as its contemplative internalization. This idea reverberates with Plotinus' suggestion that "Creation is not so much a making (*poiesis*) as a contemplation (*theoria*): the activity of contemplation, says Plotinus, *produces* the object contemplated."⁷⁴ Nader El-Bizri similarly glosses ibn Haytham, saying: "It is by way of imagination that the *eidetic* essence of a thing, which is represented by its (*sura al-kulliya*), becomes accessible, and designates the wholeness of the appearing structural properties of that individual entity and its classing among analogous species."⁷⁵ Likewise, Plotinus explains that human sensation requires powers that split up the

⁷¹ Sabra, 1989: 210. ⁷² Sabra, 1989: 207. ⁷³ Sabra, 1989: 210. ⁷⁴ McEvilley, 1980: 182.

⁷⁵ El-Bizri does not translate *sura al-kulliya*; I propose 'composite image,' referring to the idea that emerges of the many points on the object that come together via judgment in the imagination as the image of the thing. El-Bizri, 2005: 193.

object into tactile, visual, and other sensory components, and then encounters a process of unification resulting in a fixed composite image in imagination rather than in a fixed form external to perception.⁷⁶

Ibn al-Haytham confirms Mu'tazilite atomism, accepted by Ash'ari thought, by showing from experiential experiment that "there exist small bodies which cannot in any way be perceived by sight ... for any visible object, even a very small one, it is possible to find among existing bodies one which is smaller than the object and which is not sensible to sight."⁷⁷ Considering objects on a larger scale, ibn al-Haytham conceives of form as emerging from a composite of movements of the eye, through which each point on the object links to the surface of the eye by a ray. These rays add up to a geometrical cone of vision unified in the mind, which El-Bizri likens to pointillism. This suggests that form is never fixed:

When sight perceives an object whose form is then ascertained by the sentient, the form of that object will remain in the soul and take shape in the imagination. And the form of a repeatedly perceived object will be more firmly fixed in the soul than the form of one perceived only once or a few times. And when sight perceives an individual, then repeatedly and continually perceives other individuals of the same species, the form of that species will be confirmed in the soul, and a universal form of that species will thus take shape in the imagination.

... To imagine the forms of objects previously seen in the absence of these objects at the time of remembering them, is clear proof that the forms perceived by sight exist in the soul and are imprinted in the imagination.⁷⁸

The stable form is not external to us, but an illusion produced in the mind through repetitive experience that leads to the idealized stability of form.

Whereas for ibn al-Haytham this mirror is the real world in which "people see their own image," for ibn Sina the mirror becomes a metaphor for the distinction between perception of the external world and that of the composite image on the inner imagination.⁷⁹ In his discussion of love, the mirror is not a metaphor for how we perceive ourselves. It indicates world-reflection, not self-reflection. Thus discourses that use the mirror, such as the story of the competition between the artists (discussed in [Chapter 5](#)), never consider self-reflection. Rather, the mirror as metaphor enables the reflection of one entire space (the external world) into another entire space (the internal world/the space beyond the looking glass).

While ibn Sina and ibn al-Haytham follow Galen in locating the internal senses in the composite sense, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali located these senses

⁷⁶ Warren, 1966: 278. ⁷⁷ Sabra, 1989: 9.

⁷⁸ Sabra, 1989: 208, 210, 211, 212. See also Necipoğlu, 1995: 21. ⁷⁹ Smith, 2008: 309.

at the heart, as preferred by Aristotle.⁸⁰ He elaborates on the nature of the heart more fully in the *Revival of the Religious Sciences (Ihya Ulum al-Din)*:

Know that the locus of knowledge (*mahall al-'ilm*) is the heart ... It relates to the realities of knowable concepts as a mirror does to the forms of colored objects. Just as every colored object has a form whose image is impressed upon and appears in the mirror, so every knowable concept has a reality whose form is impressed upon and becomes manifest in the mirror of the heart. Just as in the former case there are three distinct aspects – the mirror, the forms of individual objects, and the appearances of their images in the mirror – so in the latter case there are three [distinct] aspects as well: the heart, the realities of things, and the fact of these realities' appearance and presence in the heart. Thus the term 'knower' refers to the heart wherein the image of the realities of things is located, the term 'knowable' denotes these realities, and the term 'knowledge,' the appearance of their image(s) in the mirror [of the heart].⁸¹

These ideas reverberate not only with the Platonic segregation of appearance and the Real, but also with precepts of the fifth-century Gandharian Buddhist thinker Vasubandhu, whose tripartite system of soul, mind, and body resembles that described by Plotinus. For him, all things “are just like the images in a mirror which are devoid of any objectivity that one can get hold of,” which also resembles Plotinus' statement that “[Particulars are] nothing but phantoms in a phantom, like something in a mirror ... like things in a dream or water or a mirror.”⁸²

Al-Ghazali expresses similar ideas in his Persian-language *Alchemy of Happiness (Kimya-i Sa'adet)* of 1105:

The first step to self-knowledge is to know that thou art composed of an outward shape, called the body, and an inward entity called the heart, or soul. By 'heart' I do not mean the piece of flesh situated in the left of our bodies, but that which uses all the other faculties as its instruments and servants. In truth it does not belong to the visible world but to the invisible, and has come into this world as a traveler visits a foreign country for the sake of merchandise, and will presently return to its native land. It is the knowledge of this entity and its attributes which is the key to the knowledge of God.⁸³

The confluence of Greek and Buddhist texts in Alexandria renders their transmission to the Islamic world through Sasanian houses of wisdom quite probable, enabling al-Ghazali to articulate the cosmopolitan accretion of knowledge that comprised Islam in its process of becoming.

⁸⁰ Black, 2005: 313. ⁸¹ Treiger, 2012: 32. ⁸² McEvilley, 1980: 185 (111.6.7).

⁸³ al-Ghazali, 1993: 18.

Dominant modern historiography envisions late antiquity as exclusively in the so-called Western tradition. Modern European thought traces itself through the appropriation of antiquity in Renaissance Rome, renewed in eighteenth-century neoclassicism. Islam appears as an interloper in this antique cradle of civilization. Yet Islam emerged indivisibly through the formative integration of this thought.⁸⁴ Understanding Christianity as antithetical to this tradition – which it had, after all, actively rejected through its expulsion of the philosophers – the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun saw his caliphate, not the Eastern Roman Empire, as the true heir to Greek scholarship. Similarly, ninth-century thinkers, including al-Farabi and al-Jahiz, traced their intellectual inheritance through Greek philosophy. Thinkers adept at the rhetorical arts of antique philosophy developed a system of argumentation, known as *al-kalam* (speech, discourse, or *logos*), to convince non-believers of Islam.⁸⁵ Once opened, the doors of interpretation can never be fully closed.

Contrary to a dominant historiographical model that the spread of Islam constituted a break with its precedents, the norms of perception expressed in early Islamic discourses underscore the continuity of late antique perceptual culture and philosophy. In incorporating a growing field of ideas, scholars working under Islamic patronage were not interested in a competitive politics of who owned ideas, but in knowledge. Rather than imagining a preexisting Islamic culture translating texts to gain access to them, a more accurate model of translation into Arabic might be as a reflection of the value placed on diverse texts already understood by sophisticated, multi-lingual scholars. Translation shifted linguistic hegemony and popularized access to texts already well understood by sophisticated multi-lingual scholars. An underlying preference for inward mimesis, already articulated in late antiquity, persisted through the Quran into later theorizations of Islamic perception.

Our understanding of the Quran reflects a parallel historiography. Considered within the faith, the premise of God-as-author precludes a historical source for the Quran. Yet, inimical to divine authorship, secular analyses suggest that the Quran may have been compiled from Christian and Judaic liturgical sources codified through exegesis in the Umayyad period. This can be seen clearly in passages – including the Opening, the Sura of Light, and the Sura of the Cave – closely resembling earlier Syriac liturgies. The presence of an icon in the pre-Islamic Kaaba similarly suggests the integration of Christianity in pre-Islamic Arabia. Later

⁸⁴ Darling, 2014. ⁸⁵ Fowden, 2015: 149–152.

discussions of the legitimacy of pre-Islamic and Judaic texts known as *israeliyyat* underscore scholarly engagement with these sources.⁸⁶ One of several contending theories concerning the early history of the Quran suggests that Arabs came to rule through gradual Roman withdrawal rather than conquest, resulting in an additive early Islamic culture. While the Arabic (Bedouin) populace at the time was pagan, elites practiced an Abrahamic monotheism. The increased separation from the Eastern Roman Empire by ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (r. 685–705) led to a consolidation of an Arab monotheistic religion, separate but related to Judaism and Christianity at a time when the variety of their texts and liturgies had also not been reduced into their modern canonical forms.⁸⁷ Fred Donner uses the vocabulary of the Quran itself to argue that *muslimin* (lit. ‘those who submit,’ but understood as ‘Muslims’), initially referred not to the followers of a new religion of submission (Islam), but to believers of a non-differentiated monotheistic practice with a charismatic leader.⁸⁸

Emerging within late antique culture, receptive precepts implicit in the Quran nourished antique notions of mimesis. The notion of a deeply subjective understanding of the sensory world imprinted on the heart of the believer moved from an implicit precept in the Quran to explicit theorization in the thought of ibn Sina, the science of ibn al-Haytham, and the inspiration of al-Ghazali. Even if secular science denies divine origins to the Quran, faith in its sacrality offers a different mode of knowing that performs the inherent divinity of the text. For the believer, the presence of God relies not on worldly history, but on the articulation of divine speech. Between these possibilities of truth, only God can know.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Bernstein, 2006: 9. ⁸⁷ Nevo and Koren, 2003. See also Donner, 2008: 30.

⁸⁸ Donner, 2010.

⁸⁹ Akkach relates a sixteenth-century adjudication between the testimony of faith and that of reason through a comparable solution. Akkach, 2005b: 115–116.

Far from a secular flaunting of sanction, the image in Islamic discourses can reveal faith, often in the most unlikely of guises. This is exemplified in the story of the competition between the artists of Rum and Chinese artists.¹ Retold by al-Ghazali, Nizami, Jalal al-Din Rumi, and ibn Khaldun, it underscores the enduring interconnectedness of the Islamic intellectual world with ancient philosophy in Greek and contemporary interlocutors from neighboring regions. The temporal, linguistic, and geographical persistence of the story points to its importance, as well as to the dynamic self-referentiality constituting Islam. Rather than making a direct mimetic claim, the image in Islam emerges as a symbol of the necessary distractions through which humans may come to apprehend the Real.

5.1 Abu Hamid al-Ghazali between Plotinus and the Buddha

The trope of competition in instructive stories deploys the common poetic device of antithesis to establish an apparent contradiction whose resolution points to a greater truth. Al-Hujwiri's parable of the prophet David's musical competition ([Chapter 2.2](#)) emphasizes the centrality of subjectivity in understanding the permissibility of music. Similarly, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali uses a framework of competition to describe the relationship between visual images and perception. His parable was repeated in many forms over the centuries, reflecting his longstanding popularity as a premier Islamic thinker. Although contested by later puritan scholars, his popularity reflected his ability to integrate the teachings of philosophy and mystical inspiration into Islamic theology. His 1091 appointment as a

¹ Often translated as 'Roman' or 'Greek,' the word 'Rum' was used in the Islamic hegemonic world to refer to the peoples of the Eastern Roman Empire (and subsequent political entities), who spoke Greek and whose life and travels often included modern Egypt, Asia Minor, and Greece. In this chapter, I use Rum in my own discussion and translations, but maintain the translation choices made in directly quoted materials.

scholar at the Nizamiyya Madrasa in Baghdad illustrates his role in religious institutionalization. Despite his apparent renunciation of philosophy expressed in the *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, his spiritual crisis only four years after his appointment led him to reconcile theology with Sufi insight in later texts replete with philosophy. Calling himself the *mujaddid* (reviver) of Islam and later known as the ‘proof of Islam’ (*hujjat al-Islam*) he wrote in both Arabic and Persian to address to the broadest possible community of Muslims.

His treatise *Balance of Action* (*Mizan al-Amal*) compares the attainment of knowledge through philosophical and Sufi inspiration. It suggests that for most people, the acquired intellect enabled through philosophical speculation is fraught with the danger of complex, potentially heretical false doctrine. Instead, the inspiration (*ilham*) and unveiling (*kashf*) through which God casts light into the heart of the believer through Sufi practice ultimately provides the same kind of knowledge as philosophy. He found the polishing of the heart, which made the replica shine directly to them through divine illumination, still more effective. He therefore advocates Sufism over the logical deductions of empiricism as the preferable path to knowledge for most people.² Adhering to the Aristotelian preference for rationally argued demonstrative over intuitively understood symbolic speech, al-Ghazali generally employs direct argumentation.³ However, much as Plato deploys allegory despite his wariness of poets, al-Ghazali deploys a parable to elucidate the interdependence of both rhetorical strategies:

This reminds me of an example where it is not ruled out for people with limited intellect who require sensible examples to simulate understanding the truths of reason. It also illustrates the difference between the two groups. It is said that the Chinese and Romans were competing before a king over the highest skill in drawing and painting. The king decided to give them a vault in which the Chinese could paint one wall, and the Romans the other. Between them a curtain would be drawn to prevent each group from observing the other. As soon as they were finished, the curtain would be lifted, both sides would be judged, and the winner would emerge. And so it came to pass. The Romans collected innumerable rare colors, while the Chinese, without using any colors, made their side polished and smooth, such that the observers wondered at how they could want no colors. When the Romans announced that they were done, the Chinese said they were as well. The Chinese were asked, “How could you be done, when you have used neither colors nor have painted?” They repeated, “Don’t worry! Lift the curtain,

² Heath, 2005: 196–7. ³ Gutas, 1988: 306.

and we will prove ourselves.” The curtain was lifted. Then one saw their side shining and full of the same colors as that of the Romans, because in its purity and clarity, it functioned as a mirror. The side of the Chinese excelled through more clarity; on it appeared what the Romans had also tried.

So it is with the soul in relation to the record of divine knowledge. You have two possibilities to create these impressions: the first is the appropriation of drawing itself (that is called art), as with the Romans. The second is the readiness to apprehend the drawings from outside. ‘Outside,’ here refers to the preserved tablet (*al-lauh al-mahfuz*) and the spirits of the angels. On them is the truthful knowledge actually always painted, exactly as in your head the entire Quran is recorded, when you have thoroughly learned it, as with all your knowledge. But this is not a sensory perception or a visible drawing, but one of the spirit, the existence of which is denied by one whose perception is limited to and does not rise above the sensible things.⁴

Al-Ghazali recognizes truth in reflection rather than representation. Yet far from undermining the image, the reflection requires the image in order to supersede it.

Referring to the Orphic myth in which the Titans distract the infant Dionysus with toys including a mirror before plotting to dismember him, Plotinus describes the mirror as a distraction, yet also as a space of return enabling the apprehension of the Real:

The souls of men, seeing their images in the mirror of Dionysus as it were, have entered into that realm in a leap downward from the Supreme: yet even they are not cut off from their origin, from the divine Intellect; it is not that they have come bringing the Intellectual Principle down in their fall; it is that though they have descended even to earth, yet their higher part holds for ever above the heavens.⁵

Physical reality is through-the-looking-glass. Like the mirror, art is also a toy: “Art ... is an imitator, producing dim and feeble copies – toys, things of no great worth – and it is dependent upon all sorts of mechanisms by which alone its images can be produced.”⁶ By analogy, art, like the mirror, which is like the world itself, functions as a distraction and yet also a space of return toward the Real.

Plotinus’ discussions reflect Socrates’ use of painting as a trope in Plato’s *Republic*.⁷ Socrates first uses painting as a metaphor for creating an ideal city – just as a painter selects perfect parts from several bodies to depict one ideal, the dialogue aims to assemble perfect paradigms of governance in imagining an ideal state. Soon after, the painter again serves as an

⁴ al-Ghazali, 2006: 114–115. ⁵ Plotinus, 1991: 265 (4.3). ⁶ Plotinus, 1991: 263 (4.3).

⁷ Halliwell, 2002: 58.

archetype: he can empirically build the rules for beauty by making constant comparisons and observations, thus building a clear pattern or model for the soul in a manner unachievable by a blind man. Visuality serves as a metaphor for the broader concept of empiricism. Like vision, data enables information. Yet without insight, neither suffices for the apprehension of truth. Socrates explains this through the allegory of the cave, in which humans fettered to materiality mistake shadows on the walls for real objects. Concluding the narrative, Socrates proposes that the released captives gain the ability to view truth not by looking at it directly, but through stages that involve looking at shadows and reflections of the real. As the philosopher is one who is always “in love with learning which helps to reveal that reality which always is, and which is not driven this way and that by becoming and ceasing to be,” the guide from the cave toward the eternal Real is the philosopher.⁸ The stages of revelation enabled by philosophical guidance resemble those encountered by the Sufi initiate on the path to enlightenment. In contrast to Socrates’ cynical observation that the philosopher would get slaughtered if he ventured to return to the cave (foreshadowing his own demise), al-Ghazali’s spiritual rather than political motivations obviate any discussion of a potential threat from enlightenment.

Like al-Ghazali, Socrates indicates the pitfalls of the image, condemning painting as twice-removed imitation. Suggesting a hierarchy valorizing the ideal (such as the idea of a couch) above the manifestation of the ideal object in its physical form (such as the couch as made by a carpenter) above the imitation of the manifestation (such as the painting of a couch), he disparages imitation as false. He says it is as though somebody walked around with a mirror, with which you could create “the sun and the heavenly bodies, soon create the earth, soon create yourself, other living creatures, furniture, plants.”⁹ If we read Plato’s rendition of Socrates as a straightforward instruction manual on the ideal city, a technocratic world of philosophers who eschew empiricism and the arts, dwelling only in the cave of their minds, then the analogy of painting-as-mirror favors aniconism. Yet the dialogue quickly turns to discussing Homer as the imitator of imitators. By analogy, it indicts its own judgment. Likewise, *The Republic* itself is Plato’s representation of Socrates’ representation of a past conversation, and thus also, like a painting, a double imitation.¹⁰ Unless Plato denigrates himself as untrustworthy, the only possible resolution to the

⁸ Plato, 2000: 187 (and sections 472d, 484c–d, 514a–520a, and 532a–c).

⁹ Plato, 2000: 315 (596d). ¹⁰ Hyland, 1988.

potential deception of the image is for the viewer to retain a critical faculty at ease with the necessary gap between representation and truth. Socrates explains:

The thing we have to remember in all these cases is this. When someone tells us ... that he has met a man who has knowledge of all these crafts, and of all the things each individual practitioner of them can know ... the answer we should give someone like this is that he is some sort of simpleton, who has apparently come across a magician and imitator, and been taken in by him. He has decided this man is an expert, because he himself is incapable of distinguishing knowledge from ignorance or imitation.¹¹

The warning is not against painting, but against imitation; or not against imitation, but against gullibility; or not against gullibility, but failure to critique unwarranted authority. Just as this failure leads a listener to fall prey to false rhetoric, it leads the Platonic city to almost inevitably fall to tyranny. Although often interpreted as a prescription for the ideal state, *The Republic's* internal inconsistencies, apparent absurdities, and dialogic structure contribute to its interpretation as a warning against epistemes that valorize the static accumulation of information over the dialogic and rhetorical processes of communication.¹² Plato and al-Ghazali express similar ambiguity toward representation: the value of painting lies not in the perfection of its verisimilitude, but in the capacity of the recipient to remain cognizant of its distinction from truth.

The cave provides a metaphor for the relationship between hegemonic truth and any episteme. Discussing the inability of the escaped prisoner, enlightened by seeing the sun, to return to its darkness, Socrates explains: "Back in the cave they might have rewards and praise and prizes for the person who was quickest in identifying the passing shapes, who had the best memory for ones which came earlier or later or simultaneously."¹³ The cave peculiarly resembles a darkened room where art historians project lantern (or PowerPoint) slides to give order to the chaos of created objects through models of movement across time and place. The cave is the episteme that frames the categories and operations delimiting knowledge. The projections are the hegemonic truth that knowledge is believed to harbor. Plato's attack, of course, is not on a modern discipline called art history, but on the purposes behind their projection: the ideology as it makes men and their circumstances appear upside down.

¹¹ Plato, 2000: 317 (598d). ¹² Allen, 2013: 186. ¹³ Plato, 2000: 222 (516d).

Like Plato, al-Ghazali uses parable to discuss painting less as an aesthetic object than as a trope. The wall painting, executed by the Rum artists suggests outwardly oriented mimesis, representing an absent reality. This deficiency emerges only when the curtain is pulled aside, revealing reflection, both physically and cognitively. In constructing the story, al-Ghazali compares a painter in the usual sense to Plato's metaphorical painter holding a mirror to the world.

Signifying the polished heart of the Sufi adept, the mirror enables the viewer to see the absence inherent in the image. The image is revealed as supra-real; matter becomes visible in its quiddity, through the irony of its re-presentation in the ethereal space on the other side of the glass. This absencing of apparent presence, or revelation of presence as absence, represents experiential knowledge enabled through Sufi intuition. Whereas ibn al-Haytham observes that "reflection itself weakens light and color," al-Ghazali underscores the metaphorical nature of this internalized mirror as a sacral space magnifying the glory of the physical world.¹⁴

The curtain indicates the distinction between mundane and sacral space. Although frequently used today to refer to female body covering, in the Quran the word *hijab* indicates a spatial boundary. In the Quran it can indicate the boundary between humanity and God: "It is not granted to any mortal that God should speak to him except through revelation or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger to reveal by His command what he will" (Q42:51). Similarly, in Sura 19, Mary separates herself from her family using a partition to create a sacred space where she can receive the annunciation. Yet it can also indicate a physical curtain, as when, in the Quran, visitors to the compound of the Prophet are entreated to address the wives of the Prophet from behind a partition (Q33:53); or when a hidden partition separates non-believers from Quranic recitation (Q17:45).¹⁵

This understanding of the veil, both protective and prophylactic, as the boundary of perception permeates Islamic discourses. On the one hand, non-believers do not partake in the bounty of Quranic recitation through audition. On the other, the veil shelters the uninitiated from the overwhelming power of divine encounter. This usage relates not so much to the noun *hijab* as to the verb *kashafa*, referring to God removing the covering from the eyes of believers (Q50.22, 53.57–58). The *Hadith* indicate that there are 70,000 veils between God and creation. These veils become the

¹⁴ Smith, 2008: 162. ¹⁵ Berger, 1998: 93–96.

basis for multiple cosmologies, as well as for the stations of unveiling as a Sufi progresses on the path toward the manifestation (*tajalli*) of God. Several Sufis discuss not only the veiling of God for the protection of humankind, but unveiling as a beneficence provided by God. In the *Niche of Lights*, al-Ghazali describes God as the Opener of Eyes, the Unveiler of Mysteries, and the Lifter of coverings.¹⁶ The curtain in the parable thus functions as both a physical spatial partition between the mundane (painted) and the sacred (mirror) space, and a metaphor for divine grace. The process of pulling it aside indicates the transitional moment of revelation.

Al-Ghazali describes how the heart might lose its mirroring capacity to perceive the Preserved Tablet: it might lose shape, become tarnished, blocked, or face the wrong way. Intrinsic deficiencies in the heart include: stains from previous disobedience to God or indulgence in bodily desires; inattention to hidden divine realities; accepting opinion as truth; solely following authority; and the inability to reason.¹⁷ The emphasis on the king as thinking through a problem, and then physically removing a veil, suggests the comparative roles of reason and divine inspiration, elsewhere indicated as a divine blowing aside of the veil.

The mirror trope reverberates with the metaphor of the clean mirror representing the pure mind of the Buddha, described in the eighth-century Platform Sutra. The metaphor develops as the 'polished mirror' in the story of Great Master Mazu Daoyi's enlightenment in the *Anthology of the Patriarchal Hall* (952), and in the more popular *Record of the Transmission of the Lamp* (1004–7). The earlier version relates:

Reverend Ma was sitting in a spot, and Reverend Rang took a tile and sat on the rock facing him, rubbing it. Master Ma asked, "What are you doing?" Master [Huairang] said, "I'm rubbing the tile to make a mirror." Master Ma said, "How can you make a mirror by rubbing a tile?" Master [Huairang] said, "If I can't make a mirror by rubbing a tile, how can you achieve Buddhahood by sitting in meditation?"¹⁸

Al-Ghazali's identification of the polished mirror with the Chinese artisans suggests a source for this metaphorical wisdom, but the meaning diverges. The *koan* suggests that only self-abnegation beyond intention enables non-being. Conversely, al-Ghazali's self-conscious polishing of the mirror guided by Sufi practice enables a heightened consciousness of the real. Similarly, Plotinus elevates art as a revelation of the ideal already present in

¹⁶ Gruber, 2019: 140–141. ¹⁷ Treiger, 2012: 68–69. ¹⁸ McRae, 2004: 81.

the human soul. Set against the trope of painting as a metaphor for the logical, rational method of knowledge identified as Greek, the mirror becomes the space in which the real, deceptively diminished in its painted re-presentation, shines in its true ephemerality.

Similarly, for Plotinus, in moving beyond the limited realities of nature and reflecting the ideal, the arts can enhance reality in reflecting the ideal beyond the actual realization of the ideal in nature, which is already the simulacrum of the ideal.¹⁹ This does not happen through the materiality of the work, but through the affective experience of the artist who, in making an ideal, realizes what is already present within himself:

Suppose two blocks of stone lying side by side: one is unpatterned, quite untouched by art; the other has been minutely wrought by the craftsman's hands into some statue of god or man, a Grace or a Muse, or of a human being, not a portrait but a creation in which the sculptor's art has concentrated all loveliness.

Now it must be seen that the stone thus brought under the artist's hand to the beauty of form is beautiful not as stone – for so the crude block would be as pleasant – but in virtue of the Form or Idea introduced by the art. This form is not in the material; it is in the designer before it ever enters the stone; and the artificer holds it not by his equipment of eyes and hands but by his participation in his art. The beauty, therefore, exists in a far higher state in the art; for it does not come over integrally into the work; that original beauty is not transferred; what comes over is a derivative and a minor: and even that shows itself upon the statue not integrally and with entire realization of intention but only in so far as it has subdued the resistance of the material.²⁰

Much as Plotinus' artist brings forth a perfection not in the object, but in his own being, al-Ghazali's Chinese artists achieve higher realism than those of Rum through polishing what already exists in themselves. The wall represents perception already inscribed within their hearts.

As with the medium of music, here mimesis occurs not in the relationship between the representation and the external painting or artwork, but in the resonance between the real and the soul of the maker/receiver. Although the story focuses on a king, his objective gaze does not represent the subjectivity through which art functions. Rather, it is the one who, as in Plotinus, brings forth the ideal through the resistant medium of stone; or as in al-Ghazali, the one who reflects the ideal by polishing his own rusted heart, who experiences the real. Art functions through its experiential performativity rather than through a disengaged process of observation. The relationship between the mirror and the Chinese artists of al-Ghazali's

¹⁹ Halliwell, 2002: 317. ²⁰ Plotinus, 1991: 410–411 (5.8.1).

story, and the representational art as described by Plotinus, suggests that the identities assigned to each group may refer to the sources for the parable – the Rum write about images; Chinese, about polished mirrors.

Although the king functions as judge or spectator, he is not the paradigmatic recipient of inward perception. Rather, it is the Chinese artists – those who polish the wall of their soul – who enable the resonance of the real as it already exists within them. The king thus does not see his own reflection even when standing between the competing images. The mirror appears to reflect that which is opposite to it, the painting/reason of the artists of Rum. However, it is a representation of the real, not as it exists in the artwork, but as it already exists in the purified soul. In realizing this, the king effectively joins the consciousness personified by the ‘Chinese’ artists.

Unlike mundane mirrors, this internal mirror is not one of self-reflection: the king does not see himself set against the world of the image, or in the space of the Real beyond the mirror. The absence of the king’s reflection resonates with ibn Sina’s understanding of the mirror as an unreal space. In his consideration of meteorology in his *Book of Healing* (*Kitab al-Shifa*; *Sufficiencia* in Latin) he describes phenomena such as halos, rainbows, and shooting stars as “imaginary phenomena” in which “our senses come across the visual image of a thing together with the form of some other thing, as we come across the form of a man together with the form of the mirror.”²¹ He explains that the reflected form is not really imprinted in the matter of the form that transmits it, “just as the form of a human person is not truly imprinted and does not subsist in the mirror.”²² Al-Ghazali’s parable uses the mirror to express the revelation of reality in the mirror of the polished soul against the impression manifest in the painting. Its refusal to entertain illusions, whether in paintings or in mirrors, is reflected in absence of the king’s reflection. This absence transforms the narrative into a parable demonstrating how the human soul can reflect divine presence without its being inherent in or united with the soul. The king peers into the Real without the illusion of his own presence.²³

What can we learn about painting from al-Ghazali? Not much. One might assume that this is because the cultural capital for art appreciation did not exist in an aniconic culture. Yet *ekphrasis* was not uncommon in Islamic literature. For example, the Abbasid poet Buhturi (820–897) vividly described a mosaic at Khosrau II’s palace at Ctesiphon depicting his 540 victory against the Romans at Antioch.

²¹ Sinai, 2015: 284. ²² Sinai, 2015: 284. ²³ Sinai, 2015: 289 n. 38.

When you behold the picture of Antioch, you are alarmed (as) between Byzantium and Persia,
 The Fates there waiting, whilst Anoushirwan urges on the ranks under the royal banner.
 (Robed) in green over gold, proudly flaunting the dye of the (red) turmeric,
 And the press of men before him, all silent, lowering their voices,
 Some cautiously reaching out the foreshaft of a lance, some fearfully averting the spear-points with a shield.
 The eye describes them as really alive, signaling like the dumb to one another;
 My doubt concerning them augments, until my hands explore and touch them.²⁴

Buhturi describes a scene so visually realistic that he feels compelled to touch it. In contrast, al-Ghazali acknowledges painting as quotidian without describing it. Paintings are a vehicle and not an end. Less forbidden than trivial, their outward mimetic capacity pales in comparison to the inward mimesis that he advocates.

5.2 Nizami, the Paintings of Mani, and the Mirrors of Suhrawardi

Approximately a century later, Nizami included a variant of al-Ghazali's parable in his *Iqbalnamah*. Whereas al-Ghazali's parable uses painting as a trope for the tension between materiality and the Real, Nizami uses the story to discuss art. Rather than emphasizing the soul, he theorizes representation through reference to Mani, the mythologized founder of Manicheanism, filtered through the thought of Suhrawardi.²⁵

Nizami describes a scene where the Chakan, ruler of China, participates in a drinking party at the court of Alexander, populated by courtiers from Rum, Iraq, and Abyssinia. As they compare the achievements of various lands, a disagreement emerges about which country makes better art. They decide to split a vault in two with a curtain, allowing artists from Rum and China to paint each side, unseen by the other. When the curtain was lifted,

²⁴ Shahid, 1995: 235–236.

²⁵ The historical basis for depictions of Mani reflect that he spent time at the Sasanian court but encountered disfavor with Zoroastrian clergy and subsequently fled to Central Asia. Akbaria, 2007: 86.

There was no difference in either form or color. The viewers stood in amazement, unable to find an explanation. How could both the young 'Manis' have created the same 'Artang'? The king sat between the two paintings and looked at them, but could also see no difference. He also could not immediately solve the riddle. However much he thought about it, the truth remained hidden for him. Nonetheless, there was a difference: one image gave off a shine; the other, captured it.

But as the wise [Alexander] observed the two images and the idolatrously beautiful forms, the incident seemed to him unprecedented. It left him no peace, and he meditated until he figured it out. He ordered the curtain to be closed again, and as soon as he separated the vault, one of the paintings disappeared, but the other shone. The Rum drawing held its painting and its colors, but the Chinese one was rusted. The disappearance of the image on the Chinese wall filled the ruler with wonder. He lifted then curtain up again, and the same picture appeared anew. Then he knew that the shining niche had been polished and the painting was reflected in it. As they had worked, the artists of Rum had painted, while the Chinese had polished. And everything that one wall had captured in painting, the other offered through its reflection. The competition was resolved as follows: each side had been advised by insight. Nobody understood painting as the artists of Rum, but in polishing were the Chinese the masters.²⁶

Understood as a metaphor for rhetorical practices as well as mimesis, Nizami's rendition equalizes the value of knowledge acquired through reason and intuition by emphasizing their interdependence.

Although the poetry describes the act of painting, it does not describe the image. This is left to artists illustrating it, as in a detached manuscript page from the mid-fifteenth century familiarizing the scene through a contemporary setting showing wall painting at the Timurid court.²⁷ [Plate 7] It depicts a royal hunting scene in which retainers, one of whom holds a flask, sit at the top of the scene, looking upon the hunting ground where the mounted ruler has already decapitated a lion and killed a deer. The figures in the center, seated in front of a window indicating a tree with cherry blossoms outside and under a curtain, indicate wonder with fingers at their lips. They look at the mirror, which exceeds the image by replacing its

²⁶ Nizami, 1991: 289. Like many scholars, Bürghel translates Rum as "griechisch." Implicitly associating "Greek" with the modern state of Greece and, by extension with Europe and the Western appropriation of antiquity, this translation ignores the conflated connotations of Rum as both contemporary Greek speakers in (formerly) Eastern Roman territories and as authors of ancient philosophical texts inherited by the Islamic world. Neither the Chinese nor the Rum were alien to the Islamic hegemonic world. Rather, they function as semi-internal tropes between which the self emerges.

²⁷ Lentz, 1993.

mundane colors with a gold ground identical to that used to depict the garden outside the background window. The inclusion, within the interior space, of outside scenes in both the wall paintings and through the window suggests engagement with the poetry's thematization of interiority and exteriority.

Nizami's inclusion of Mani in the condensed parable indicates a contemporary cultural shift. Although banished in the first century of Islamic rule, Manicheism persisted into the fourteenth century in Central Asia. Both Firdausi's *Shahnameh* and al-Biruni's treatise on India depict Mani as a false prophet, flayed alive for the deception inherent to his extensive use of painting. Firdausi condemns him through reference to the *Hadith* warning that artists would have to breathe life into their creations. He explains:

An eloquent man arrived from China, and the world will never see his like again ... He said, "I am a prophet and a painter, and I am the first of those who introduce new religions into the world." He asked from an audience with Shapur ... [who calls in his priests, and the chief priest answers,] "You love images; why do you foolishly strive with God in this way, God who created the high heavens and made time and space in which darkness and light are manifest ... Why do you put such trust in images, ignoring the advice of the prophets? Images are multiple, but God is one, and you have no choice but to submit to him. If you could make your images move, then you could say that this is a demonstration of the truth of what you say. But don't you see that such a demonstration would fail"²⁸ ... Mani's credibility withered away. The king ... had him dragged away. He said, "The world has no place for this image maker; he has disturbed the peace long enough. Let him be flayed and his skin stuffed with straw so that no one will be tempted to follow his example." They hung his body from the city gates, and then later from the wall in front of the hospital. The world praised Shapur, and men flung dirt on Mani's corpse.²⁹

Mani's hubris in attempting the act of creation through painting causes his effigy to become like a votive statue receiving damning libations.

Conversely, Nizami portrays Mani as an exemplary artist. Such redemption began earlier, in *The Book on the Nature of Living Beings* (*Taba'i al-Hayawan*) by Sharaf al-Zaman Tahir al-Marwazi (c.1056–1120), physician to the Great Seljuq sultan. He writes:

²⁸ Roxburgh translates this passage as, "Even if you could make this picture move, is it proper to take the movement as proof?" Roxburgh, 2001: 175.

²⁹ Ferdowsi, 2007: 598.

[Mani] used to have recourse to religious knowledge that gave him [unequaled] piety. He was also so skilled in drawing and making pictures that he used to spread out a piece of Chinese silk with a length of more than twenty cubits (more than 9 meters), and pick up the *khama*, the painter's brush, and draw a line on the cloth from the beginning to the end in such a way that the line never went beyond the edge of a silken thread of the warp. He could draw a circle out of the hand, and when one put the compass on it, it would exactly coincide with it ...

He (Mani) often traveled through the wilder regions of China and its mountains, and one day he passed by a fissure in the mountain leading to a remote cave ... [where he retreated] ... He had taken a scroll that resembled paper, but which was very fine and completely white. He painted it with remarkable images, and he drew pictures of every (kind of) demon and crime, such as robbery, fornication, and so on, and beside the crimes the required punishments and he drew underneath the illustration of each demon and a picture of what it produces.

Then he came forth from the cave with the illustrated scroll in his hand. He said: "I have been alone with my Lord, and He has commanded me to establish his ordinances. This is the book that comes from God Most Exalted!" They looked at it and saw that a human being would be incapable of producing its like or its equal, and so they believed him. He named this (scroll) *Arthang*, and it still exists today in the libraries of their rulers under the name *Arthang of Mani*. Its antiquity is confirmed.³⁰

Marwazi underscores Mani's prophecy through the revelation of a book in a cave, analogous with Quranic revelation. Mani's replacement of divine speech offering earthly guidance with a didactic visual text emphasizes the distinction between the auditory revelation of Islam and the visual revelation of a neighboring religion. Similarly, an anonymous Chaghatai version describes a work given to Mani in a cave, where he invents pages: "One of his miracles is that he would cut out twenty ells of silk cloth equally, so that when one measured them with a rod they would be absolutely the same." However, the Artang is held in a box hiding its form:

In India he made idols and led the people astray with his painting. On the way to China there are many mountains ... Finally, he took up residence in a cave. And on the specified day Mani emerged with a box in his hands. He said, "I declare to you the commands of the God of Heaven. The thing in my hand is a book (*kitab*) revealed by the God of Heaven." They called the book the *Arzang of Mani*. That box is still preserved in the treasury of the Chinese emperors ...

[When he returned to Iran], Bahram summoned him asked, "What is your intention and what is your faith?" Mani explained his doctrine and said, "A man's spirit is imprisoned inside his body. When his breath is cut off, the bird of his spirit

³⁰ Gulácsi, 2015: 161–162.

flies out from the breath, and that light is freed from its prison.” Bahram said, “If that is so, then is death better than life?” Mani replied, “Death conveys a man to eternal life. This transitory life is bound up with desire and sensuality.”³¹

Hearing that Mani preferred death to life, Bahram acts on Mani’s agreement with the former king to be executed upon his return. So he is skinned alive, stuffed with straw, and hung on the city gate. Although the Chaghatai author recounts Mani’s dramatic execution and display, the preceding discussion of Mani’s awareness of not controlling mortality seems to absolve the artistic presumption of imitating God’s creation. Mani admits that no amount of painting can grant life.

The Quran describes the only exception to this rule through the double miracle of Jesus – his birth, and his miraculous ability to give life through the grace of God:

This is how God creates what He will: when He has ordained something, He only says, “Be,” and it is ... He will send [the son of Mary] as a messenger to the Children of Israel: “I have come to you with a sign from your Lord: I will make the shape of a bird for you out of clay, then breathe into it and, with God’s permission, it will become a real bird.” (Q3:47–49)³²

The miracle is emphasized again: “By my leave, you fashioned the shape of a bird out of clay, breathed into it, and it became, by my leave, a bird” (Q5:110).³³ It echoes the description in the Gospel of Thomas the Apostle: “When He had kneaded soft clay, He wrought thereof twelve birds ... Then Jesus clapped His hands, spoke unto the birds and told them: ‘Fly off!’ And the birds spread their wings, flew off, and chirped.”³⁴ In contrast to Firdausi’s condemnation, the anonymous narrative affirms Mani’s use of images by implicating him in his own demise.

Nizami transforms Mani into the artist nonpareil, creator of the *Artang*, the book of images depicting the path of the elect to light used by Manicheans to instruct believers and often appearing as a large image or scroll that could be viewed by many people.³⁵ Nizami’s conflation of a wall with the *Artang* suggests knowledge of this specific use, perhaps through awareness of Manichean wall paintings in nearby regions.

Nizami avoids condemning the *Artang* by framing its deception within another, transforming Mani’s painting into a revelation. Implicitly criticizing the narrowness of his own era, he underscores Mani as a model for artists of the era of Alexander through a second story about Mani

³¹ Gulácsi, 2015: 167–168. ³² Abdul-Haleem, 2004: 38. ³³ Abdul-Haleem, 2004: 79.

³⁴ Barry, 2004: 7. ³⁵ Klimkeit, 1998: 274.

immediately following that of the competition. Mani sets off to China to proselytize. When the Chinese learn of this, they quickly

Set a trap for him, placing a pond [made] out of crystal in his way. Artists had painted waves on its glass surface, making it look like rows of waves rolling to the shore on the surface of the pond. And around the pond they placed green grass that looked as though it grew around the pond.

When Mani came by, he was very thirsty, hurried to the pond, and took out his jug to fill it. But as soon as his jug touched the rock-hard pond it broke since it was made out of clay.

Mani understood that the Chinese wanted to give him misfortune with this pond. So he took a feather and began to paint using all the rules of art on the pond to fool the one who had fooled a Mani. With the malleable brush he painted a dead dog on the glassy surface, the carrion of which was being eaten by an army of worms, so that anybody who saw the dead dog in the pond would never want to quench his thirst there.

As the patrons in China learned of the warning Mani had left on the water, the people tended to be spellbound by his magic and tended towards him and his “Artang” book.³⁶

Mani’s transition from heretic to hero hinges on his deceptive image protecting the innocent by thwarting earlier duplicity. The image is particularly repellent for Muslims, who conceive of dogs as unclean in the context of prayer (although working dogs have long been common). His painting reverts the gaze to truth by undermining deceitful representation. Popular literature often repeated such warnings, as in this the fable related by Aesop: “A pigeon had grown very thirsty, so she flew from place to place looking for some water to drink. She saw a water jar painted on a wall and thought that it was actually full of water, so she flew right into the wall in order to take a drink.”³⁷ A similar story describes painting in the Brethren of Purity’s discussion of craft:

Painters ... do nothing more than imitate existent forms, be they natural, artificial, or of the soul, yet their skill is enough to draw the viewer’s eyes to [the depiction] and away from the existent thing itself due to *ta’ajjub* [amazement] regarding its beauty and brilliant appearance. It also happens that the difference between artisans can be quite large. It has been said that a man from one place or another used to paint images and likenesses (*suwar wa tamathil*) in bright pigments and beautiful, luminous colours, and that viewers who saw them experienced *ta’ajjub* [wonder], due to the [image’s] beauty and brilliance. But there was deficiency in his work such that a skilled and talented artist passed by, stopped to closely scrutinize

³⁶ Nizami, 1991: 291–292. ³⁷ Breccoulaki, 2015: 218 (Fable 434).

them, and then wished to offer a critique; so he took a piece of charcoal from the road and depicted next to those images a Zanj man who appeared to be making a gesture with his hands at the viewer. After that, the viewer's attention was diverted away from the coloured images and towards his, and there was *ta'ajjub* [wonder] due to his creation being '*ajib* [wondrous], and the beauty of its gesture and the form of its movements.³⁸

As in the story about Mani, competition emerges through happenstance, as the artist better able to fool the eye upstages that which previously appeared sufficient. Yet the demonstration is not merely visual: the new figure, characterized as foreign through emphasis on his dark skin (*zanji*), gestures toward the viewer, undermining its illusionism by making the layers of deception apparent. The realism of the charcoal image renders its deceit apparent.

The theme of art as fruitful deception also recalls the Quranic tale of Bilqis's conversion by attempting to wade in glass (discussed in [Chapter 4.1](#)). Visuality in general may be suspect in its production of false icons, but it serves as a bridge toward recognition of the invisible form of the divine. This doubled gaze resembles a mirror in which we see not the representation, but the representation of the representation, as in the competition of the artists or the Simurgh (discussed in [Chapter 3.3](#)).

The shift from representation in the sense of the image, re-presentation in the mirror, and political representation becomes clear through the attribution of the invention of the mirror to Alexander earlier in the Nizami's *Book of Alexander*.³⁹

As Alexander became the key of the world, his sword began to shine like a mirror, and the world was as the bride of this mirror as she prepared herself for the unveiling. Mirrors were unknown before Alexander and were initially prepared through his wisdom. The first try failed. One poured silver and gold in a mold and polished the casting, but one could not see one's own form. Then followed experiments with all other metals. Each showed distorted images until iron came into use, when the image shown from the substance. As he polished it, the blacksmith who made it became a painter, because the essence of things delighted and as the metal shone it showed all forms just as they are. Then they gave the mirror all possible forms, in which no real image emerged. If it was wide, then it showed one wide, if one looked at it oblong, it lengthened the forehead. A square appeared cross-wise, a hexagon deformed. As one made the form round, a shape was achieved with no deformity. Wherever one stood, the reflection was evenly good, so one left it at that.

³⁸ Saba, 2012: 201. ³⁹ This legend is not in Pseudo-Callisthenes.

With such techniques the king unlocked clear reflection from opaque metal. But when you look in this mirror, you can now see the behavior of Alexander as an example. For when one gives the hard back of Iron a round face, its entire nature transforms in refinement. And because Alexander was the first to look into the mirror, some of his nature entered the nature of the mirror. He was so happy to see his own image that he kissed the back of the mirror. And each bride who follows the convention, makes the mirror part of the dowry so that she kisses him in it.⁴⁰

Thus the wisdom of Alexander initiating his sovereignty emerges through the metaphor of (in)sight enabled through the reflection of the world, as likened to the act of painting. The story invests the gaze into the mirror with a creative capacity not merely seeing the world, but seeing it in exemplary form. The mirror resembles a painting, but its power lies in the transparency of its deception: its demonstration that it is not a painting depends entirely on the self-reflexive capacity of the observer. In retaining the capacity to distort, the mirror represents like a painting, but retains the self-conscious presence of the viewer.

In Nizami's rendition of the competition of the artists, the doubling of the *Artang* through the mirror, suggestive of the dualistic nature of Manicheanism, mediates the 'idolatrous' beauty of the image. In Firdausi, the *Artang* signaled Mani's false prophecy through its intrinsic failure to represent the real. Conversely, in Nizami, its reconstitution in the mirror undermines its deceptive properties. The artists, described through Mani, are great not because they try to represent prophetic truth through realistic representation, but because the interplay between the image and its reflection undermines deception. The figure of Mani is redeemed through the reflection of his image in the functionality of the mirror.

Nizami's understanding of the mirror reverberates with that expressed by Suhrawardi in his *Philosophy of Illumination*, written approximately a decade before Nizami's *Iqbalnamah*. In it, Suhrawardi describes "the world of Suspended Images," or "the world of incorporeal figures," as a realm entered through dreams, imagination, and mystical vision, full of suspended images and incorporeal figures mediating between the divine realm and our own. This space resembles the types of virtual realities that we today refer to as cyberspace, which may not be real but can only be accessed through the gateway of our computer interfaces rather than through the mirror.⁴¹

Objects in mirrors enable a higher reality than the body inhabited within the 'fortress' of nature.⁴²

⁴⁰ Nizami, 1991: 93–94. ⁴¹ Sinai, 2015: 297. ⁴² al-Kutubi, 2013: 134.

The images in the mirrors and the imaginative forms are not imprinted [in a place]. Instead they are suspended fortresses – a fortress not in a locus at all. Though they may have loci in which they are made evident, they are not in them. The mirror is the locus in which the form is made evident. These forms are suspended and are in neither a place nor a locus. The imaginative faculty is the locus in which the forms of the imagination are made evident and are suspended. Since there can be such a thing as an incorporeal image in a mirror without depth ... and self-subsistence, there can also exist a substantial quiddity having an accidental image.⁴³

The revelation of the mirror through the withdrawal of the curtain presents a conundrum, which Suhrawardi sums up in the description of the mirror as existing “without space and without place,” yet nonetheless real enough to support perception.⁴⁴ That which is physically manifest becomes already incorporeal – the mirror, as it were, reveals the existence of the Platonic form, the light essence, imprisoned in and hidden by the object as well as by the image deceptively claiming to represent it. For Suhrawardi, vision “is consciousness of the thing seen.”⁴⁵ The image constitutes “objective correlates of certain acts of perception and the imagination rather than ... mental constructs.”⁴⁶ This emphasizes not the object so much as the subjective experience of vision. He explains:

Since you know that vision is not by the imprinting of the form of its object in the eye nor by something emerging from the eye, it can only be by the illuminated object being opposite a sound eye – nothing more ... Being opposite amounts to the absence of a veil between that which sees and that which is seen.⁴⁷

The veil may be physical, as in the story of the competition, or spiritual, hiding the truth of immateriality central to the story.

For Suhrawardi, even the physical body is not entirely located within itself. As John Walbridge explains:

The body is the ‘locus’ (*mahal*) of the form but not necessarily its place. Such are the forms of the World of Image. The body, in some mysterious way, is the condition for the form’s appearance, but the form is not in the body in the way that the form of the dog is in the body of the dog. Instead, the locus makes it possible for the form to be manifest to us – but we see the form, not the locus. Our brain and our organs of sensation are such loci. They make it possible for us to see or hear or smell the forms, but the forms are not imprinted in them in the way that they are in their bodily instances.⁴⁸

The body thus is no different from the image which is more real and resplendent than in the reality beyond the mirror.

⁴³ Suhrawardi, 1999: 138. ⁴⁴ Sinai, 2015: 291. ⁴⁵ Walbridge, 2001: 160.

⁴⁶ Sinai, 2015: 294. ⁴⁷ Walbridge, 2001: 160. ⁴⁸ Walbridge, 2000: 169.

These ideas had long-lasting repercussions. In his 1258 compilation entitled *The Rose Garden*, Sa'di of Shiraz (1210–1292) describes the verbal and the visual as interchangeable in calling his own poetic work “a Chinese picture gallery, the picture of artang.”⁴⁹ Repeating the stories from Nizami’s *Khamasa*, the sixteenth-century Persian commentator Dust Muhammad refers to the images separated by a curtain in the competition as “two Artangis.”⁵⁰ Similarly, the early seventeenth-century chronicler of calligraphers Qadi Ahmad praises an artist with the diptych, “When he pictured water on a stone / Anyone who saw it broke his pitcher on it.”⁵¹

The emphasis on allusions to form (in the same Mughal manuscript of Nizami’s *Khamasa* as the illustration of Plato at the organ discussed in [Chapter 3.2](#)) underscores both the cultural continuity of the poem and its reinterpretation in a context of increasing sophistication in painting. The painting of Mani drawing the dead dog [[Plate 8](#)] offers an imaginary landscape with architecture inspired by European perspectival drawing, but still replete with the Chinese tradition of painting seen in rocky outcroppings. Rather than a pond, Mani here appears to draw on a block of marble, suggesting a palace pool or the plinth under a marble tomb, like that built for Akbar. The scattering of tools for manuscript painting around the artist frames him not as foreign, but as a Mughal artist, perhaps a flattering self-portrait through comparison to Mani. In the foreground, two hunters carry snares as the one in the foreground turns and looks back at Mani, who draws the dead dog as numerous animals walk around, unaware of their proximity to death. The converging narratives offer multiple meditations on deception. Hunters trap animals to live. Yet their traps deceive the living, who remain unconscious of death, whether animal, lounging on the green rolling hills in the foreground, or human, standing at the battlements of the palace and failing to see Mani. The composition defends painting as a useful material vessel for the contemplation of death and the ephemerality of life before the eternal.

5.3 Jalal al-Din Rumi between the Mirrors and Veils of ibn Arabi

When Jalal al-Din Rumi retells the story in his *Mathnawi*, he switches the artists’ identities – the Chinese paint, while the artists of Rum polish. Although he had migrated from Balkh as a child, he favors the region of

⁴⁹ Soucek, 1972: 11. ⁵⁰ Roxburgh, 2001: 179. ⁵¹ Minorsky, 2013: 177.

his maturity – Anatolia, from which he gets the sobriquet *Rum* – by identifying them with intrinsic wisdom. Like al-Ghazali, Rumi alludes to the ones polishing the mirror as external to theory, but of pure hearts (lines 34–35). Yet unlike Nizami’s subtle use of poetry as a popularizer of complex ideas, his work explicitly elucidates its spiritual implications. The familiarity of the narrative to his educated readers allows interpretation to blossom.

Once the Chinese said, “At art we’re the best!” 1
 The Greeks said, “With more talent we’ve been blessed!”
 The sultan said, “I’ll set a test for you
 To see which of your claims is really true.”
 They all prepared to paint a room’s interior, 5
 In knowledge though the Greeks were far superior.
 “Come, show us to a room,” said the Chinese,
 ”and give the Greeks one similar to it, please.”
 They found adjoining rooms which formed a pair,
 One half for each group, thus completely fair; 10
 Then the Chinese requested lots of paint,
 The king supplied them, generous as a saint:
 Each drawn from his own storehouse men would bring
 More paint for them as gifts from this kind king.
 The Greeks said, “Colorful paints will not prove 15
 Successful – color’s what we must remove!”
 They closed their space off, polished every wall
 Clear as the heavens up above us all;
 Color to colorlessness can change quite soon,
 Color’s a cloud, colorlessness the moon; 20
 If in the clouds some radiance should appear,
 It’s from the sun and moon that it shines here.⁵²

Rumi discusses the mirror not simply as a polished surface in relation to light, but as one removing color and connected to the sun and the moon. This correlates with ibn Arabi’s interpretation of color in relationship to the cosmos, which depends on the distinction between material form and the Platonic Real. He explains:

Know that what is ‘other than the Reality,’ which is called the Cosmos, is, in relation to the Reality, as a shadow is to that which casts the shadow, for it is the shadow of God, this being the same as the relation between Being and the Cosmos, since the shadow is, without doubt, something sensible. What is provided there is

⁵² Rumi, 2004: 212. The “Greeks” in this translation indicates the artists of Rum.

that on which the shadow may appear, since if it were possible that that whereon it appears should cease to be, the shadow would be an intelligible and not something sensible, and would exist potentially in the very thing that casts the shadow.

The thing on which this divine shadow, called the Cosmos, appears is the [eternally latent] essences of contingent beings.⁵³

For ibn Arabi, Reality is as God. The Cosmos is as his shadow, providing a sensible substrate enabling the perception of reality. As in Plato's allegory of the cave, ibn Arabi considers materiality as a necessary deception, for without the substrate of the cosmos, the Real could not be seen: it requires the very quality of presence which its non-being obviates. This leads ibn Arabi to describe the divine as being/non-being (*wujud/la-wujud*). His thought resembles Plato's intertwining of materiality and divinity. In *Phaedrus*, Socrates describes the region above heaven as "occupied by being which really is," as "without color or shape, intangible, observable by the steersman of the soul alone, by intellect, and to which the class of true knowledge relates."⁵⁴ The discussion comes not, however, as part of a disavowal of materiality, but as part of the palinode which recognizes physical love as the inextricable manifestation of a divine madness difficult to distinguish from premises informing the Sufi quest.

Likewise, ibn Arabi aligns shadow with the ephemerality of color:

Have you not observed that shadows tend to be black, which indicates their imperceptibility [as regards content] by reason of the remote relation between them and their origins? If the source of the shadow is white, the shadow itself is still so [i.e. black].

Do you not also observe that mountains distant from the observer appear to be black, while being in themselves other than the color seen? The cause is only the distance. The same is the case with the blueness of the sky, which is also the effect of distance on the senses with respect to nonluminous bodies ...

The Reality is, in relation to a particular shadow, small or large, pure or purer, as light in relation to the glass that separates it from the beholder to whom the light has the color of the glass, while the light itself has no [particular] color. This is the relationship between your reality and your Lord; for, if you were to say the light is green because of the green glass, you would be right as viewing the situation through your sense, and if you were to say that it is not green, indeed it is colorless, by deduction, you would also be right as viewing the situation through sound intellectual reasoning.⁵⁵

⁵³ Austin, 1980: 123.

⁵⁴ Plato, 2005: 27. Among the works of Plato summarized by al-Farabi in his *Philosophy of Plato*, *Phaedrus* would have been familiar to many Muslim intellectuals. Mahdi, 1962: 62.

⁵⁵ Austin, 1980: 123–124.

Ibn Arabi refers to the middle of the imaginal world of autonomous forms and images as *mu'allaqa*, “in suspense”: “not inherent in a material substrate like the color black in a black table but ‘in suspense’ in the place of their appearance, in the imagination, like an image ‘suspended’ in a mirror.”⁵⁶ Similarly, Rumi indicates a mirror that reveals color as part of the deceptive play between the Cosmos and the Real, the color of the glass in which luminosity becomes visible.

Rumi continues:

Once the Chinese felt their work was complete
 They banged their drums to celebrate this feat,
 The king arrived and saw such paintings there
 That stunned him, for their beauty was so rare;
 Then he went to the Greeks, who quickly raised
 The screen in front and left him more amazed:
 The image of that work which was so fine
 Reflected on the walls that they'd made shine –
 Whatever he'd seen there shone on each wall,
 Out of their sockets eyes began to fall!
 The Greeks stand for the Sufis clearly:
 Without techniques from books of theory,
 They've cleansed their breasts so well that they shine bright
 Free from all stinginess, desire and spite.
 The heart's a mirror with such purity
 It can reflect forms from eternity:
 Such a pure image, boundless, unlike art,
 Shone through the hand of Moses from his heart;

 These forms the heavens even can't contain
 Nor throne, nor ocean, nor an open plain,
 For they're all numbered and delimited,
 While hearts are one and they're unlimited –⁵⁷

Like Nizami's depiction of the *Artang* tablet, the painted wall resembles the cosmos without embodying it. This cosmos/painted wall must be present/painted to enable revelation in the mirror. As in Plotinus' allegory of the two stones, if neither wall is painted – if there is no competition of the artists – we have only two walls (or two stones) and thus have no opportunity for vision. Ibn Arabi explains:

⁵⁶ Corbin, 1966: 407. ⁵⁷ Rumi, 2004: 212–214.

The seeing of a thing, itself by itself, is not the same as its seeing itself in another, as it were in a mirror ... The Reality gave existence to the whole Cosmos [at first] as an undifferentiated thing without anything of the spirit in it, so that it was like an unpolished mirror. It is in the nature of the divine determination that He does not set out a location except to receive a divine spirit, which is also called *the breathing into him* [Q21:91] ... Thus the [divine] Command required [by its very nature] the reflective characteristic of the mirror of the Cosmos, and Adam was the very principle of reflection for that mirror and the spirit of that form ... each of these [cosmic] faculties or powers is veiled [from knowing the whole] by its own self ... so that it cannot know anything that excels it.⁵⁸

We could, however, also understand the Cosmos as the mirrored wall reflecting the painted wall, itself a shadow of the Cosmos, through the process of unveiling which reveals the painting to ultimately have no form. As Rumi describes it, the “heart’s mirror” (referencing the polished wall in the story) remains bound not simply to the image it reflects, but to “forms from eternity.” The reflection expands not only beyond art, but also beyond the scripturalism implicit in the reference to Moses.

The Quran indicates that God gave Moses the book, which was later lost and superseded by the Quran (Q5:44). While the preserved Torah is not identical to the Quran, Rumi here underscores that the message of prophecy, inscribed on the heart of the Prophet and expressed through the shining hand (which presumably writes), is a single light of the divine. This enables the individual heart to merge with the universality of divine light through reflection rather than reason:

The brain falls silent here or goes astray:

The heart’s with God, or is God in some way.

No form’s reflection shines eternally

But through the heart, home of infinity,

For every image which should reach this place

Appears without a veil across its face.

Polishers fled all colors, so they could

Each breath sees what is beautiful and good:

Beyond the husk of knowledge they can see,

They’ve raised the banner of true certainty,

All thought has left them, for they’ve seen the light,

The sea’s depths and their breasts they keep in sight.

Of death all other men are running scared,

⁵⁸ Austin, 1980: 50–51.

To mock and laugh at it these men have dared,
 To conquer their hearts there's no hope in hell –
 The pearl is not harmed, only its mere shell;
 Transcending grammar, law, theology,
 They've chosen self-effacement, poverty,
 When images from heaven shone to earth
 Their hearts received them, and they knew their worth;
 Their place is loftier even than God's Throne,
 God's *Seat of Certainty*, they've made their own.⁵⁹

The breath of those who polish the heart/wall enables clarity where the image can appear without a veil. For ibn Arabi, creation (the Cosmos) is the ever-renewed exhaled breath of God, enabling each instant to re-create perpetual divine creation. Similarly, the seeker of knowledge polishes the mirror as in breathing – perpetually.⁶⁰

This enables the veil over the mirror – what Nizami refers to as rust – to lift.⁶¹ As for ibn Arabi, such knowledge is not intellectual. The silence of the brain enables the banner of true certainty to rise as the two sides appear in each other: the Cosmos, embodying the Real (the painted wall), and its shadow as imprinted on the unveiled, polished heart of the seeker. Ibn Arabi describes this thus:

Then He raises the veil between Himself and the servant and the servant sees Him in the form of his belief; indeed, He is the very content of the belief. Thus, neither the Heart nor the eye [of the Heart] sees anything but the form of its belief concerning the Reality ... Thus the eye sees only credal Reality, and there are a great many beliefs.⁶²

This self-revelation of the unveiling closely parallels ibn Arabi's use of the mirror as a metaphor for revelation as self-revelation.

Whenever a gnostic receives a spiritual intuition in which he looks on a form that brings him new spiritual knowledge and new spiritual graces, [he should know] that the form he contemplates is none other than his own essential self, for it is only from the tree of his own self that he will garner the fruits of his knowledge. In the same way his image in a polished surface is naught but he, although the place or plane in which he sees his image effects certain changes in accordance with the intrinsic reality of that plane.⁶³

⁵⁹ Rumi, 2004: 212–214. ⁶⁰ Austin, 1980: 146–148.

⁶¹ Metal mirrors rusted when unpolished. Austin, 1980: 48. ⁶² Austin, 1980: 149.

⁶³ Austin, 1980: 69.

Similarly, Attar conflates true knowledge with sight, rendering direct teaching impossible – sight must be perceived rather than learned.⁶⁴

Like the insufficient icon of the Simurgh; much like the need for glass in Solomon's exemplary conversion of Bilqis; just as Nizami purifies deception through the broken jug – Jalal al-Din's rendition necessitates painting as a means of indicating the impossibility of representing the Real. The image becomes not simply an image, but an image reflecting the absence of the real. This awareness becomes the space in which the Real can be experienced. The image represents not despite its deception, but because of it; not through mimesis, but through reflection. Like materiality as discussed by Plotinus and al-Ghazali, the deceptive nature of the image emerges not as a deficiency so much as a fortuitous necessity: only through it can reflection enable access to hidden truth.

While these ideas about the mirror reverberate, how contact may have taken place between theoretical and poetic mystics is unclear and probably unknowable. Nizami must have been well integrated in the scholarly circles of the southern Caucasus where he worked under the patronage of various courts. Suhrawardi gained acceptance at the Great Seljuq court, then traveled to Aleppo in 1183. There he wrote his *Philosophy of Illumination*, but was executed as a heretic in 1191.⁶⁵ The two could not have met. Correlations in their work may be referential (Nizami may have read Suhrawardi's writings), involve shared sources, or reflect intellectual conversations of the era. Texts often fail to fully document oral discourses considered trustworthy conveyors of knowledge.⁶⁶

It is likewise unclear whether the encounter between ibn Arabi and Rumi was worldly or gnostic. Anatolian followers of ibn Arabi did become close friends with Rumi. This does not mean, of course, that they read the books we read.⁶⁷ Within the rational system of gnosis, knowledge emerges through inspiration. Texts make it clear that study enables the purification of the heart. However, the profound knowledge intended to guide humanity toward the absolute truth of the divine comes through visionary experience. To look for an attribution would be absurd. Even looking at the times and places of meetings becomes untenable as long as we respect non-modern, non-empirical epistemes. Visionaries transcend time and place by visiting each other's dreams. The greatest shaykhs report their erudition as emerging from visionary apparitions of much earlier shaykhs and prophets. Even when great mystics are said to meet physically, they are not described as talking or sharing texts. For example, when ibn Arabi is

⁶⁴ Dabashi, 2003: 970. ⁶⁵ Yalman, 2012. ⁶⁶ Terzioğlu, 2002; Green, 2010. ⁶⁷ Safi, 1999.

said to have met Suhrawardi in Baghdad, they are said to have had a “short silent meeting” after which the elder shaykh recognized the younger as “an ocean of divine truths.”⁶⁸ Similarly, hagiographies of Rumi reflect real and spiritual relationships with predecessors. More than direct referentiality, such correlations between multiple thinkers suggest that common sight-related tropes such as the mirror and the veil circulated in mystical thought, constructing foundational elements in a discursive lexicon of representation.

5.4 Ibn Khaldun and the Polished Mirror as an Allegory of the Sciences

Appraising the mystical tradition, ibn Khaldun allegorically compares the physical and spiritual sciences through the competition of the artists.⁶⁹ He explains that the word Sufi comes not from any of its popular derivations as ‘wool’ from the cloak of the dervish, ‘bench,’ or ‘purity,’ but from the verb *tasawwuf*, meaning “the vigilant observance of good behavior in relation to God in interior and exterior works, in precise fidelity to his orders, by putting the interest of the acts of the heart first, from Whose hidden movements are closely watched, in the ardent desire to obtain thereby salvation.”⁷⁰ He then details the relative roles of juridical science and *tasawwuf*, and the ways of attaining knowledge in each.

Citing al-Ghazali as his source and identifying the artists as Indian and Chinese, ibn Khaldun uses the story to distinguish roles for scientific and Sufi knowledge. He compares the wall painting with creation and the divine Tablet: “When God created this creation, he did not bring sensible existence about all at once. He brought it progressively, in phases. Initially he gave it its substantial realities and essences, large and small, in their entirety and in their particularity, and that in the book that he called the Tablet (*al-lawh*).” This reaffirms the Ash’ari refutation of a rationally created Quran. The Tablet had to precede history to not be historical. Creation therefore must have taken place in phases, with the establishment of the word/discourse/*logos* – as embodied in the Quran. Ibn Khaldun

⁶⁸ Austin, 1980: 9.

⁶⁹ His work *Shifa al-Sa’il li-Tahdhib al-Masa’il* (*The Response that Satisfies he who Tries to Clarify Questions*) was written in Fez in 1372–1374, in response to a controversy among the scholars of Granada about whether pursuit of the Sufi path necessitated a master.

⁷⁰ Ibn Khaldun, 1991: 129–132. All subsequent quotations from ibn Khaldun in this section continue the same passage.

explains: "He called the production from nothing of this creation, the word (*al-qalam*), as is clear in the absolute (*zawahir*) sections of the Quran. Thus in this tablet, were the realities (*haqiq*) of that which was, or would be, or is, until the day of judgement." The wall painting represents realities for man as embodied the created world. In nature, God inscribes the subtle principle of the divine origin for man to discover.

Then God saw fit to let this creation of this tablet to sensible existence through a progression in being ... And as God had inscribed in nature this subtle principle of divine origin which he would find in the recognition and the science of the profound reality of these created beings and the attributes of their creator.

Ibn Khaldun offers two 'inclinations' through which humans can know the world. He recognizes that we can discover creation through information which the senses extract and the intellect abstracts. Imagination and discursive thought organize this information through a signifying system. He suggests an ideal in which we would discover the imprint of the divine within the self because we are already part of creation. But this proves difficult because both being human and having a body interrupt perception: they are the veil between the Tablet of creation and the subtle principle of the divine embodied in nature.

If thus the veil is lifted through the purification and liberation of the impurities, this produces the most advanced form of perception, and this perception is more perfect than that which operates through the other inclination, since the senses and the imagination are not assured to extract so well the forms and profound realities of the sensible created beings that they can transmit as is; and discursive thought, on the other side, is no more assured of being able to abstract them to organize them in a meaning which enables their conceptualization (*tasawwur*).

The senses are the very instruments through which we can discover the divine in nature, engage discursive thought, and give these signs meaning. Yet they interrupt direct access to the divine, enabling yet marring vision. The only solution is to discover the divine inwardly, in the mirror, without the intervention of sensory or intellectual instruments. "In effect, the former (senses and imagination), like the latter (discursive thought), are two instruments, two intermediaries in the service of the subtle principle which furnishes him with what he already possesses in his own essence ... for this reason, the perception that he has in this inclination is clearer." Plato becomes the model for this type of thinking. Like Nizami, ibn Khaldun envisions Plato as transcending reason toward perception of the divine.

And it is for this reason that Plato, who was the greatest of the philosophers and the greatest of the Sufis of antiquity, did not see decisive proof in the perceptions of acquired science, which remained on the surface of the spiritual world. He said, "Through them, one only arrives at the most probable and the most moral." And he established between acquired science and infused science the same relationship as between opinion and science.

Whereas for al-Ghazali, the Sufi path offers the more direct role to knowledge, ibn Khaldun finds it generally inaccessible. Rational science thus enables the most probable and moral, if not definitive, knowledge. Not everybody in the Islamic world, after all, had to be a mystic.

The repetition of narratives of artistic competition in Islamic discourses suggests both the mundane nature of painting and its conceptual importance. Both al-Ghazali and Rumi discuss the symbolic utility of painting with no concern for the issue of permissibility. Yet Nizami's inclusion of Mani, characterized as a false prophet by Firdausi, indicates concern over sanction. The resultant understanding of the image is not one of prohibition so much as an expedient for transcendence. Parables of the image neutralize it, transforming it from a dangerous opportunity for idolatry into an indication of the impossibility of true representation – similar to the intertextual ideas embedded in Attar's rendition of the Simurgh. Far from the modern assertion of latent secularism underlying representational painting in opposition to an Islam defined solely by law, the cultural and religious aspects of Islam emerge as indivisible as a reflection and its mirror.

After the fifteenth century, the narration about competing artists shifted to more innovative stories that often referenced the parable discussed in [Chapter 5](#). Whereas earlier narrations used painting as a trope for Sufism, the new stories increasingly addressed the issue of rhetorical deception, partly exemplified by painting. Their approaches resemble Plato's discussion in *Phaedrus*. Socrates suggests that no matter how supposedly scientific, truth cannot express itself without an intermediary that appeals to the soul, and thus is necessarily rhetorical. He locates deception not in representational methods, but in the incapacity of fixed forms, such as writing or painting, to defend themselves or engage in argument.¹ Similarly, the historian al-Maqrizi narrates anecdotes of deception informing wisdom, and chroniclers of the arts Mustafa 'Ali and Qadi Ahmad delicately weave narratives revealing the denigration of art-as-deception as an evil ruse. While distinct from the competitions discussed in [Chapter 5](#), these stories reflect the same mimetic paradigms. In contrast with the popular appeal of al-Ghazali and Nizami, the ability of these authors to subtly reprise themes in new guises reflected the sophisticated, elite discursive environments of their reception.

The reliance on competition in all of these stories about representation invites comparison with the contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius, related in the first century and reprised in modern Europe. Interpreted as an allegory revealing mimesis as deception and artistry as competition, the story became central in establishing art-historical norms of disinterested objectivity. This chapter uses Islamic discourses to pry loose the planks of the resulting Eurocentric definitions of representation.

6.1 al-Maqrizi and the Politics of Competition

The historian Taqi al-Abbas al-Maqrizi (1364–1442) relates a competition between artists in the court of Fatimid vizier Yazuri (r. 1049–58), said to

¹ Plato, 2005: 63 (275 d5–e1).

have “loved painting and never tired of looking at illustrated books.”² So Yazuri invited the Iraqi painter ibn ‘Aziz, whose fame equaled that of the calligrapher ibn al-Bawwab, to compete with the Egyptian painter al-Qasir, who demanded high wages because he claimed to be as good at painting as ibn Muqla was at calligraphy.³ The Iraqi announced that he would paint an image as if it were going into the wall, while the Egyptian countered that he would paint it as if it were walking out, which impressed the audience more. When they executed their paintings of dancing girls in opposite niches, they were both equally rewarded.

Interpretation of the story hinges on the detail of Yazuri’s love of painting. Although by al-Maqrizi’s time illustrated manuscripts had become a common element of elite culture, there is no evidence of it in the Fatimid era. At first glance, the detail might seem a mere anachronism, familiarizing the court of the past in the guise of the court of al-Maqrizi’s present.

However, the story borrows from the frame story of *Kalila and Dimna*, in which the character Dimna, a jackal, describes how he would advise a ruler, allegorized as a lion:

And I shall speak gently and advise prudently; and when he hears these my words whose like he did not hear from his counsellors who preceded me, I do not doubt he shall find confidence before him, and that he will count me worthy of presents and of great honours. For a man who walks with his companion in prudence, subtle knowledge and sound intelligence, if he wishes to obliterate the truth and stultify the right, and establish and accredit the false, so that his companion may believe a lie, may sometimes be able to do so; and resembles a skilful painter who paints portraits of every kind on the walls, for these pictures that are imprinted on the walls look as if they were coming out of the wall, though they are not, and others as if they are entering into it though they are not.⁴

Al-Maqrizi’s conceit of finding the story in a historical text, rather than in fables, enables him to follow Dimna’s advice about lying in order to rhetorically advance the good or the true, even if based on a falsehood. This reflects Socrates’ distinction between a verbal falsehood, which can be used to further an underlying truth, and a real falsehood, a false belief held as absolute.⁵ His incorporation of ibn Muqaffa’s invitation to read the text to acquire wisdom suggests the continuing importance of the stories for the ethics of his own era, roughly seven centuries later.

² Necipoğlu, 2015: 36. ³ Rabbat, 2006: 102. ⁴ Keith-Falconer, 1885: 14–15.

⁵ Plato, 2000: 69 (382a–d).

The competition he describes is less artistic than a rhetorical and scientific show of skill, a courtly performance akin to poetry, music, or dance. The described paintings – black on a white ground and yellow on a red ground – seem to appear or disappear based on optical illusions discussed by ibn al-Haytham:

The inapparentness of the forms of faint lights on account of their closeness to strong lights has parallels in colors. Thus if a pure white body is dotted with a dark-colored paint, by allowing small drops of the paint to fall on it, or if minute designs are made on it with this paint, the paint will look black or very dark; its distinctive quality will cease to be apparent and the eye will not be able to perceive its true color ... Similarly, if designs are made with fresh-green paint on a dark-blue body, the paint will look [red] and of a clear color; but if designs are made with the same paint on a clear-yellow body, the paint will look [green] and of a dark color.⁶

The story also reflects ibn al-Haytham's thought in distinguishing between the external, glancing function of vision and the internalized imprint of contemplation retreating from exteriority in the space of the mind (see [Chapter 4.2](#)). Like the immobile dancing girls they depict, the paintings provide less entertainment than foils for the deployment of knowledge.

The capacity to create illusory forms persisted as a mark of mastery, as in this praise for the marquetry of the early seventeenth-century Ottoman architect Mehmet Agha: "Looking from one angle, one type of form or circle was seen, and [from another] other types of designs and patterns emerging, other forms appeared. However much the point of view was changed, that many forms were transformed into other shapes."⁷ Although the dominant mode of representation had shifted across time and place from figural to geometric, the capacity to bedazzle through the impermanence of created form serves as a mark of skill. As Graves argues, objects that allude to other states of being may function not through the representational trope of language, or the categorial distinction between text and form naturalizing the modern distinction between mind and body, but as signifiers through an "intellect of the hand" surpassing modern epistemic forms.⁸

As with al-Ghazali's parable, al-Maqrizi's decision to discuss rhetoric rather than describing paintings indicates painting as a secondary concern. The comparison is both aesthetic and political. It suggests calligraphic skill as analogous with painterly prowess. As with the Roman and Chinese

⁶ Sabra, 1989: 99; for the uses of color theory at the Alhambra Palace, see Bush, 2018: 44; under Ilkhanid rule, Gruber, 2019.

⁷ Crane, 1987: 34. ⁸ Graves, 2018: 215.

artists, the labor of the calligraphers is not oppositional, but ameliorative. Such refined, appreciative augmentation serves as a common measure of originality in poetic discourse, as well as in the call-and-response practice in regional musical improvisation (*taqsim*).

The comparison also has political implications. Al-Maqrizi, an Egyptian under Sunni Mamluk rule, uses a Fatimid source as a frame for calligraphers central to Abbasid politics. Vizier to the caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 908–932), ibn Muqla helped reify the ‘Uthmanic recension of the Quran by enforcing its inscription with a regularized script. Ibn al-Bawwab further refined the script during the reassertion of Sunni orthodoxy against Shi’ism under the caliph al-Qadir.⁹ Thus the competition of painters through the metaphor of calligraphers is not a rivalry but a shared practice with political implications. When the Egyptian artist does not oppose the suggestion of the Iraqi, but deftly supersedes it, he underscores unity in Islam over sectarianism. Similarly, although the Fatimids did not adopt the scriptural innovations of ibn Muqla and ibn al-Bawwab in their own use of scripts, Fatimid rulers showed respect for their work by collecting their pens and copies of their manuscripts in their treasury.¹⁰ Relating the story in the fifteenth century, al-Maqrizi’s rendition may have advocated for a cultural discourse transcending political and sectarian divisions.

6.2 Mustafa ‘Ali (1540–1600) and the Allegory of the Artists

Whereas earlier renditions of artistic competition used the image primarily as a metaphor, the 1587 *Epic Deeds of Artists* by the Ottoman chronicler Mustafa ‘Ali develops an allegory in defense of the permissibility of painting. The work concludes the detailed histories of individual artists and calligraphers preceding the narrative with a summation of the apparent benefits and dangers of the art of painting – approximately at the same time as the Mughal court engaged in parallel responses to the increasing presence of European modes of representation (see [Chapters 3](#) and [5.2](#)).

Mustafa ‘Ali begins by emphasizing Mani’s verism with metaphors recalling that of Jesus’ bird taking flight: “When he depicted flowing water, he would make it visible in crystal-like form, and when he depicted a blowing wind, he would make it manifest like an abundant stream.” Complex narrative metaphors weave through poetic commentary. “Story has it that among the artists of the past, three salaried masters, putting

⁹ Tabbaa, 1991. ¹⁰ Roxburgh, 2003: 44.

talent to the test, took aim at the arrows of the other masters' pens."¹¹ Thus painting is rendered as a competition. The arrow as metaphor enables an eloquent rhetorical flourish, in that successful literary criticism in Arabic often used the metaphor of an arrow hitting its target.¹²

The three artists publicly announce their intention to decorate the new, sublime pavilion of the king, and invite other artists to join in competition to decorate the fourth wall. But they lay a trap to humiliate challengers: they paint a stream and a fountain gushing sweet waters. When their competitors fail to recognize the ruse, they leave, and the three artists are left unable to understand this example as a mirror of their own pride. When Mani finds out, he rushes to the competition, where "He entered the mansion of the aforesaid three masters and at their direction, obtained and was delivered of the task of filling a jug from the fountainhead of expertise."¹³ Thus the fountain becomes not simply a visual image, but also a trope for knowledge flowing from master to student. Mani, a master himself, recognizes the fountain for what it is: he is not fooled by the false knowledge of illusionism, and sees the broken jars of those who have come before him. The narrative breaks into verse for emphasis:

At first glance, it looks as if it's flowing.
Its pure water is surging out.
Everyone reaches out with no hesitation.
With broken pieces of jugs, everywhere is filled.¹⁴

With his "wonder working reed pen, the pillar of the workshop of Artang, whose sable-tip was of the same quality and color as [the robes of] Jangiz Khan, and which ... was a non-corroding weapon like the sword of Pashang" (from the *Shahnameh*), Mani paints the maggot-ridden dog carcass, echoing the scene related by Nizami. Mustafa 'Ali celebrates Mani's prowess in verse:

The carcass is missing not one iota,
[Lack of] bad smell, it seems, is its [only] defect.¹⁵

By painting the carcass in the fountain of false knowledge, Mani doubles the ruse of the other masters, much as the Egyptian artist in al-Maqrizi's narrative augments, rather than contradicts, the intellectual prowess of the Iraqi, and much as the mirror in the competition of the artists of Rum and China ameliorates the painted wall (see [Chapter 5](#)). Still, the group persists

¹¹ Akın-Kıvanç, 2011: 277. ¹² Lelli, 2014: 203. ¹³ Akın-Kıvanç, 2011: 277.

¹⁴ Akın-Kıvanç, 2011: 278. ¹⁵ Akın-Kıvanç, 2011: 278.

with its ruse and drives Mani away. Nonetheless, when the king comes across the pool with the dog, he recognizes Mani's skill and invites him to compete with the others.

They set to work, each hidden behind a veil. One day, the ruler of China and high officials come together to judge their work.

And having each master lift the veil and spread the drape ... [the guests] were honored with enjoyment of the whimsical decorations and wondrous creations that [the masters] had been grudgingly hiding from each other. In truth, each master had crafted such inventions and [works of] originality that it would be fitting if [their] images were to be displayed as evident signs of the adornments that the perpetual decorator and the eternal artist [i.e. God] made manifest in the gardens and meadows of the highest paradise which He embellished with miraculous colors. The forms of their wondrous works were as lucid and clear as the result of their perfect prowess and flair. Nobody's distinct work was depicted in [that of] another. And the originality of no master's superior expertise was replicated on the wall of other artists. (However, the Chinese master, the artist with the seal of Mani), was well versed in assembling the techniques of painting and design. He showed that, with various [illusionistic] tricks and variegated colors, it was possible to embellish the beauties that the Artist of Imagination [i.e. God] did not impart on the Tablet of mind and the arts that the Painter of Perfection did not render on the slate of intellect. Furthermore, the other master's [novel] designs and the illustrations that they each had rendered in secrecy [were] also manifest on Mani's wall ... In other words, that peerless master gave the wall such a burnishing that [even] pure water has never been so transparent. And he gave his every image such a bright appearance that the world-illuminating mirror has never furbished plants and flowers in that tone.¹⁶

Mustafa 'Ali conflates the ultimate Sufi artist with the ultimate illusionist, rendering the skill to depict with perfect verisimilitude, as with the dog, part and parcel with that of the inward gaze of the Sufi. The next hemistich reveals his mirror as a trap for the lesser artists.

With their pure, natural quality, Mani's
 Designs became a mirror for his enemies.
 He gave [his] world[-renowned] pictures such a light that
 From end to end they began to manifest God's providence.¹⁷

Yet the praise he receives from the king brings him to the attention of the sages of the age, who "envied his rise and pursued aggressively the rules of the arts of spying and hypocrisy." Like Nizami, Mustafa 'Ali transforms the

¹⁶ Akın-Kıvanç, 2011: 279–280. ¹⁷ Akın-Kıvanç, 2011: 280.

condemnation of Mani into a demonstration of his purity. Even “when it became certain that they were going to fret his lifeless body, he did not consider turning away from his conviction that a wicked picture [should be] discarded.” Mani’s own body is the wicked picture – it is the form held sacred, which Mani sacrifices as he is made into an effigy, as are all of the painters in the society. Mustafa ‘Ali then tells of the society of binders, implying that the painting arts came to an unjust end, but survive in the broader realm of book arts.

6.3 Qadi Ahmad and Painting as Calligraphy

Roughly contemporary with Mustafa ‘Ali’s *Epic Deeds*, Qadi Ahmad’s *Calligraphers and Painters* (in Persian, *Gulistan-i Hunar*, Rose Garden of Accomplishments, c.1596–1606) only refers to the competition of the artist through brief mention of the pitcher broken against Mani’s painting of a fountain.¹⁸ Fully integrating painting into the Persianate book arts through his discourse of the two pens, Qadi Ahmad replaces al-Ghazali’s story of the competition with a different allegorical rendition of the deceptive nature of the image as revelation.

For Qadi Ahmad, the legacy of the pen is intimately tied with the sacred nature of writing embedded in Islamic history. Framing writing through reference to the heavenly tablet, he introduces the work with an encomium to *qalam*, indicating the pen but also connoting speech and philosophy. His extensive quotation from the *Rules of Alexander* (*Ayin-i Iskandiri*, 1543) by ‘Abdi Beg of Shiraz exemplifies the tradition of intertextual incorporation in a society where literary sources would be recognized by cultivated readers.

The first thing the Lord created was the *qalam*
Through the *qalam* existence receives God’s orders,
From Him the candle of the *qalam* receives its light.
The *qalam* is a cypress in the garden of knowledge,
The shadow of its order is spread over the dust.¹⁹

Playing on the ambivalence between speech and writing embedded in the word *qalam*, Qadi Ahmad describes writing as part of a system of authority from God to man through the practice of knowledge, reflective of divine order. He continues the ambiguity, referring to the reed both in its material

¹⁸ Porter, 2000: 109. ¹⁹ Minorsky, 1959: 49.

form – a bamboo reed fermented in excrement to turn it red – and yet also imbued in the seeming oxymoron of silent speech, double-tongued because of the notch holding the ink in the nib of a reed pen.

You are a curious beauty, O reed clad in a red garment,
Double-tongued in converse, yet silent.²⁰

In this Platonic image, writing becomes the perpetually imminent possibility of speech. This shifts into a metaphor where the reed becomes tall as a tree, and the shadow cast by divine illumination transforms into the black ink that emerges through its trace.

Showing off your cypress stature, throwing a shadow
Trailing under your feet a tress of the color of the night ...
[*]Not an arrow, yet taking the course of one towards the target,
Which is mostly paper.
At times you are Moses, at times Samiri,
At times taking for device the splitting of a hair,
Or else failing in the task by a hair's breadth.²¹

As on the tablets given to Moses, writing conveys authority. Yet like the golden calf created by Samiri (Q20:85), writing also deceives and, like philosophy and *qalam*, argues. Having traced the pen through its legacy of divine speech to writing through content, Qadi Ahmad wittily incorporates painting.

The *qalam* is an artist and a painter.
God created two kinds of *qalam*:
The one, ravishing the soul, is from a plant
And has become the sugarcane for the scribe;
The other kind of *qalam* is from the animal,
And it has acquired its scattering of pearls from the fountain of life.
O painter of pictures that would have enticed Mani
Thanks to you the days of talent have been adorned.²²

Thus differentiating between the reed and the brush (made from the fur of animals), he explains that the animal *qalam* is but a hair “by whose enchantment the works of those gifted in like Mani and the wizards of China and Europe (*firang*) have settled on the throne of the land of Talent and become artists (*naqsh-band*) in the shop of Destiny.”²³ Contemporaneously with

²⁰ Minorsky, 1959: 49. ²¹ Minorsky, 1959: 49. ²² Minorsky, 1959: 50.

²³ Minorsky, 1959: 50.

Abu'l Fazl's negotiation of European painting in the Mughal context, Qadi Ahmad's writing reflected a similar naturalization of painting among the arts.

Like Mustafa 'Ali, Qadi Ahmad quickly retreats from his celebration of painting, citing writing through the legacy of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib as a source of beauty through virtue.

The aim of Murtada 'Ali in writing
Was (to reproduce) not merely speech, letters and dots,
But fundamentals, purity and virtue
For this reason, he deigned to point to good writing.²⁴

Calligraphy thus produces beauty in the soul of its practitioner. The written form reflects this internal beauty. Qadi Ahmad cites Plato as having said, "Writing is the geometry of the soul, and it manifests itself by means of the organs of the body."²⁵ Echoing the Brethren of Purity's Platonic account of writing and the proportions of nature and the body through geometry, Qadi Ahmad suggests that not only the hand, but any limb might be adapted to the practice of writing. The quality of writing is based on virtue that emerges through the cleansing of the soul, which may be created through the discipline of training through repetition, but also may emerge from the pure soul enabled to write with a foot or the mouth.

Likewise, he describes art as functioning through the insight of both artist and viewer:

Let it be clear that the wonderful phantasy and strange native force of the artists are known in all countries and witnessed by men possessed of sight. The force of imagination and refinement of nature owned by this race are not found in any other men of art. The image which the portrait-painter reveals on the tablets of the mind cannot be reflected in everybody's mirror of beauty.²⁶

The image functions through internalization by people "possessed of sight": able to reflect the artist's imagination in their own. The beauty is not an external quality of the image, but an internal quality of virtue that enables sight.

Two subsequent stories illustrate this idea. In the first, an impoverished artist from Khorasan journeys to Rum with his friend, a goldsmith. On the way, they come to a temple (*butkhana*, lit. house of idols), where they stay for several years. Winning the confidence of the monks, they acquire the keys to the treasury, break the idols, and abscond with a vast amount of

²⁴ Minorsky, 1959: 51. ²⁵ Minorsky, 1959: 52. ²⁶ Minorsky, 1959: 175.

gold and silver. Making their way home, they share the booty. One day the goldsmith steals half of that which belonged to his companion – a plot borrowed from the fable of the two merchants narrated in ibn Muqaffa's introduction to *Kalila and Dimna*. Unable to make him confess, the artist secures two bear cubs from a hunter and feeds them from a wooden effigy of the goldsmith. He kidnaps the goldsmith's sons, and then claims before a judge that they have magically turned into bear cubs. Brought to the court, the cubs immediately attack the goldsmith, seeking food. The goldsmith admits his treachery and returns the treasure, the artist returns the sons. Like the story of Mani and the pond, the story transforms the trope of the image as deception, indicated by the idols, into the deceptive image (the effigy) as revelation of a previous treachery.

He then tells a second tale in poetic form about a king who was "intimate with a felicitous" companion with artistic skills comparable to Mani.

When he pictured water on a stone,
 Anyone who saw it broke his pitcher on it.
 If he stretched his *qalam* around the moon,
 The moon did not see the darkness of the last day of the month.
 From the fountain of freshness which was his *qalam*
 Vestiges of life appeared in his tracing.
 His tracings resembled the Chinese silk, *tiraz*.

And his artistry (in its temptation) was a calamity for the faith.

Yet the king "looked at his Mani (only) with one eye," for he had another close companion, with a similar brush, competing with the first, who asked that the king demand his portrait from the first artist.

That artist (*naqsh-tiraz* or embroidery-puller) with the hand of Mani
 Fancied in his mind the image of the Shah.
 He took a page ravishing the heart.
 And, in a triumphant mood, covered it with painting.
 The Shah (was standing) with an arrow in his hand,
 And in the corner of his eye
 There was an angry glittering (as) of a lance (*sinan*),
 (For) in order to take the twist out (out of the flight) of an arrow
 One should screw up one eye.
 With this new idea the clever painter
 Disentangled the knot in the thread of his talent.
 When the Shah understood his thought deep as the sea,
 He gave him two kingdoms in reward for his labor,
 One gift was for the shape of his mastery,

The other for the play of his imagination.
 Thus the heart of the envious painter was broken;
 And in despair he sat down in the corner of affliction.²⁷

The reluctance toward theorization through images in Islamic art history has led this painting to be interpreted only by the art historian James Elkins: [Plate 9]

It is a wonderful story, with its metaphors of blindness and insight, but the painting that accompanies it in one manuscript may come as a disappointment. There we see the shah, with his arrow, sitting in front of a decorative screen on a hillside. The painter is at his feet; he is talking, and his hand rests on his painting so we can't see it. Apparently either Qadi Ahmad or his illustrator cared more about the story of treachery and inspiration than the appearance of the painting; and from what we are told about the shah's response, he may have felt the same way.²⁸

Yet the painting that we see doesn't show the competition between the artists, but is the painting described in the poem. It cannot show the competition, because the identity of the competitors continually shifts. The citation, marked with a [*] in the preceding poem, describing ink soon to reach its target, suggests that the arrow the king holds is metaphorically also a pen targeting the paper. The arrow indicates interpretation that hits its mark. It is a pen that writes thought as deep as the sea: the true artist is the one who paints the heart. Successive allusions to sexual intimacy (with the felicitous companion), to painting, and to writing come to signal the internalized divine. The king squints not because he evaluates the arrow, as in the illustration, and not because he is blind, but because closing the external eye enables him to see straight. Far from extraneous, the painting within the painting, depicting a standoff between two animals in *khata'i* style, references the Chinese associations of the Mani-like companion, allegorizes a tense stand-off, and resembles the *tiraz*-styled paintings described in the text. Thus the depiction flatters the king with insight, but through the vehicle of the portrait imagined by the felicitous companion, who is both the artist who painted this painting, wielding the *qalam* of the brush, and the writer who described it, wielding the *qalam* of the pen, and the Divine who endows insight. The divine, the word, and the image are not oppositional but indivisible; one slips into the other. In order to see the favored companion's art, the king in the illustration turns his back to

²⁷ Minorksy, 1959: 178. ²⁸ Elkins, 2013: 108.

the painting – text brings painting into being, painting renders text visible, and thought makes the Real seen. Sight comes not from looking outward, but looking inward by closing one eye. Thus the book in the artist's hand need not be open to be 'seen,' as true sight comes through *qalam* – the brush, the pen, and also as a play on *kalam*, the sophisticated speech of philosophical inquiry. The envious companion is humanity, unable to match the Divine, but also those who understand visual representation as superficial signs rather than engaging with it through the internal senses. Far from being uninterpretable, as might be inferred from the reluctance of Islamic art historians to discuss the meanings proliferating in such images, the painting participates in an extensive intellectual tradition circulating between countless texts that constitute the Islamic world. These texts neither describe nor precede that world; like Plato's *Phaedrus* conjuring the world in which the dialogue takes place, musicians conjuring their audiences, or stories that conjure competitions and paintings, these texts bring that real world into being. The world in which we live is not built by history, but by the narratives through which we narrate our perception of and responses to it. Literary rather than historical, this information does not match the types of questions favored in the secularist legacy of the discipline, averting its gaze from the philosophical or religious implications of mimesis. This does not deny the worldly aspect of artworks so much as recognize that perception takes place in a discursive field deeply informed by widely circulated spiritual meanings, precluding the distinction between secular and religious knowledge.

Aiming to engage non-Western knowledge within art-historical methods, Elkins maintains the need to distinguish between these epistemes:

Calligraphers and Painters is profoundly different from Western interests. Is it possible to imagine a contemporary Western art historian taking this up as a model? Probably only if the history were written by a devout writer whose purpose was to show how paintings can be revelations of creation itself: an impossible notion in the secular, historicized, academic world that supports art history. If Qadi Ahmad can't be read as an art-historical text, then in a real sense he can't be understood: we have passed some border here, beyond art history and into another sphere, where art is a branch of religion.²⁹

By presuming that only a "devout writer" could understand the text in its relationship to art, Elkins infers that other cultures are intrinsically unknowable unless translated into disciplinary terms and categories

²⁹ Elkins, 2013: 108.

reforming their meaning into supposedly universal terms. And yet in recognizing the allegory, he has briefly crossed the very boundary he declared absolute, only to declare such moments incommensurable with art history. But when such disciplinary limits bound our interpretive practices, can they engage with culture as it speaks to us? The imposition of such veils of secularity not only occludes the Islamic past, but the Christian investments of meaning in materiality in Europe's own traditions. As with Elkins' recognition that the story reveals Divine creativity – or mine, as I share the same intellectual tradition – a secular modern art historian can fruitfully interpret both texts and images. Just as with the Christianate interpretive schema dominating normative art history, we can understand the worldview of an Islamic discursive field without necessarily partaking in its belief system.

6.4 The Competition between Zeuxis and Parrhasius

Through its circulation from the Renaissance to contemporary art-historical discourses, the story of Zeuxis and Parrhasius has come to define the relationship presumed between the image and the world in disciplinary art history. The distinctive implications of Islamic stories of competition suggests divergent premises informing this relationship.

Elements of the anecdote first appear in the *Controversiae* of Seneca the Elder (54 BCE–39 CE):

Zeuxis painted a boy holding a bunch of grapes, and because the bunch was so realistic that it even made birds fly up to the picture, one of the spectators said the birds thought ill of the picture: they would not have flown up if the boy had been a good likeness. They say Zeuxis erased the grapes and kept what was best in the picture not what was most like.³⁰

For Seneca, quality and verisimilitude are not interchangeable. In contrast, a similar story in *The Natural History* of Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE) hinges on deceptive realism as the measure of artistic aptitude.

Parrhasius ... it is recorded, entered into a competition with Zeuxis. Zeuxis produced a picture of grapes so dexterously represented that birds began to fly down to eat from the painted vine. Whereupon Parrhasius designed so lifelike a picture of a curtain that Zeuxis, proud of the verdict of the birds, requested that the curtain should now be drawn back and the picture displayed. When he realized his

³⁰ Brecolaki, 2015: 221.

mistake, with a modesty that did him honour, he yielded up the palm, saying that whereas he had managed to deceive only birds, Parrhasius had deceived an artist.³¹

Undermining the seeming preference for verisimilitude, however, Pliny follows this with one resembling that of Seneca.

It is said that Zeuxis, I believe, painted a child carrying a bunch of grapes and that, as the grapes were so life-like that they attracted the birds, a spectator declared that the birds were making an adverse criticism of the painting: for they would not have flown down if the child had been life-like. They say that Zeuxis removed the grapes and kept what was best in the picture rather than what was most lifelike.³²

Yet only the first of Pliny's stories, and not the more ambivalent latter one, would become central to European art history as it drew on these sources nearly two millennia later.

All three stories frame visual mimetic representation in relation to outward reality. Seneca's version "makes a formal distinction between the test of likeness (*similitudo*) and the test of excellence."³³ Zeuxis' greatness emerges from his capacity to learn. While he demonstrates his skill at verisimilitude by again choosing to realistically represent the bird-fooling grapes, he chooses the more complex art of representation that reveals itself as such, rather than that which is merely realistic. Pliny's first story offers likeness as an ideal for the unsophisticated. In contrast, Parrhasius' work reveals art as a theatrical stage. He shows a doubly fictive space, managing "to create the illusion of a space in which figuration was destined to appear."³⁴

Hinging on the device of the veil, the Islamic story of competing Greek and Chinese artists uses a similar narrative framework but resolves it differently. The content of the image is largely irrelevant. Al-Ghazali describes the painting only in terms of its multitude of colors, indicating the expense and trouble invested in the painting rather than what it shows. Nizami describes the painting as "idolatrously beautiful forms." It is not clear if the forms are idolatrous because they come from the false prophet, because they come from the *Artang*, because they are so beautiful that they lead to idolatry, or because they represent sinful practices such as singing-girls or drinking. Realism itself might be idolatrous. Rumi describes even less, noting only their stunning beauty.

Whatever the paintings show, their colors shine through the clarity of the mirror – sight comes not through the eye, but through the polished

³¹ Bryson, 1983: 1. Note the parallel with Qadi Ahmad's story of the bears, where the deceptive nature of sculpture fools only bears and pagan idolaters.

³² Bann, 1989: 32. ³³ Bann, 1989: 33. ³⁴ Bann, 1989: 35.



Plate 1 Anonymous, *Temple Idols Fall and the Sea Dries up on the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad*, from the *Hamzanamah*, c.1562–1577, gouache on prepared cotton, 67 × 51 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, IS. 1509–1883. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Plate 2 Mir Kalan Khan, *Lovers in a Landscape*, 1760–1770, 22 × 15 cm. The David Collection, Copenhagen, 50/1981. Photographer Pernille Klemp



Plate 3 Anonymous, double-leaf frontispiece, from *The Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*, Baghdad, c.1287, 20 × 17 cm (each), Istanbul, Suleymaniye Library, MSS Esad Efendi 3638, fols. 3b–4a.



Plate 4 Sultan Muhammad, *Allegory of Worldly and Otherworldly Drunkenness*, from the *Divan* by Hafez of Shiraz, c.1531–33, 21.6 × 15 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988.430. Jointly owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University



Plate 5 Madhu Khazanad, *Plato Puts the Animals to Sleep with the Music of the Spheres*, from the *Khamsa* by Nizami of Ganj, 1593–1595, page 31.8 × 19.6 cm. The British Library, OR 12208, f. 298r. © The British Library Board, Bequeathed by C. W. Dyson-Perrins to the British Museum in 1958



Plate 6 Anonymous, double-leaf frontispiece, "The Courts of Bilqis and Solomon," from the *Shahnameh* by Firdausi, sixteenth century, page 41 × 39.5 cm. Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Ms. Or. Fol. 359, fols. 2v–3r





Plate 7 Anonymous, *The Byzantine and Chinese Painters Vie in a Trial of Skill*, from the *Khamse* by Nizami of Ganj, Shiraz, Iran, 1449–50, 25.4 × 16 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 13.228.3



Plate 8 Sur Gujarati, *Mani Painting a Dead Dog*, from the *Khamsa* by Nizami of Ganj, 1593–1595, page 31.8 × 19.6 cm. The British Library, OR 12208, fol. 262b. © The British Library Board, Bequeathed by C. W. Dyson-Perrins to the British Museum in 1958.



Plate 9 Anonymous, *The Story of the King with the Arrow*, from *Calligraphers and Painters* by Qadi Ahmad, c.1500, Museum of Oriental Art, Moscow



Plate 10 Anonymous, *The Night Flight of Muhammad on His Steed Buraq*, from the *Bustan* by Sa'di, c.1525–1535, 18 × 13 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1974.294.2, fol. 3v



Plate 11 Anonymous, *Shirin Looking at the Portrait of Khusrau, Watched by Shapur*, from a *Khamse* by Nizami of Ganj, 1442. The British Library, MS 25900, fol. 41r. © The British Library Board



Plate 12 Anonymous, *Khosrau Sees Shirin Bathing*, from a *Khamsa* by Nizami of Ganj, 1560. Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC: Purchase – Smithsonian Unrestricted Trust Funds, Smithsonian Collections Acquisition Program, and Dr. Arthur M. Sackler, S1986.50



Plate 13 Anonymous, *Shirin and Khosrau Play Polo*, from a *Khamsa* by Nizami of Ganj, c.1450. Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Sprenger 1475, fol. 129r

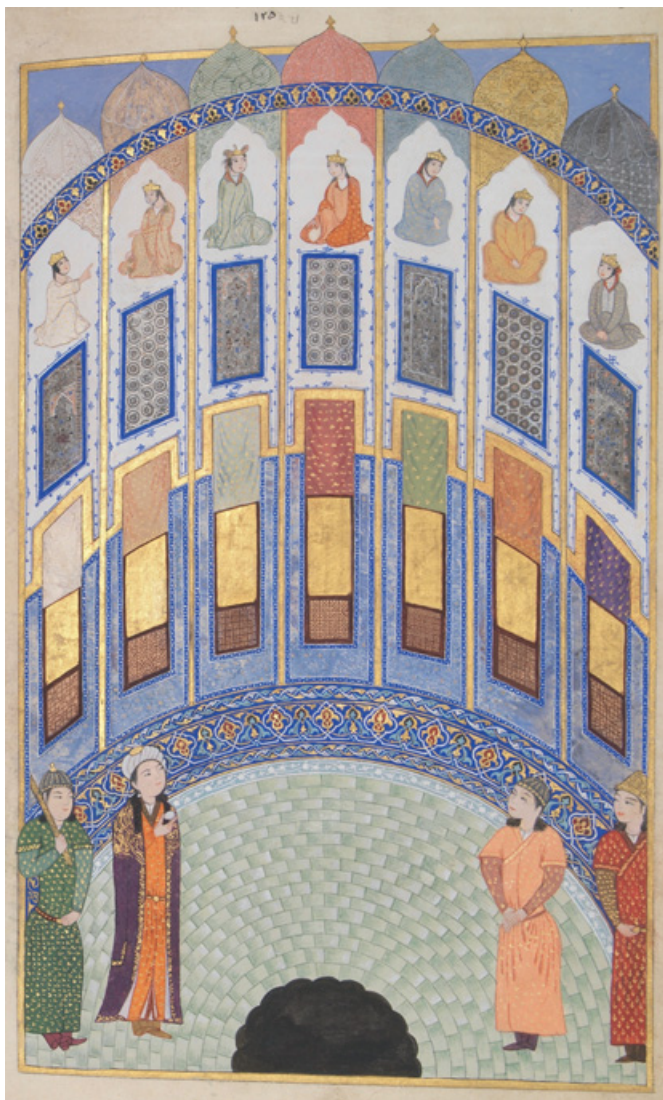


Plate 14 Anonymous, *Bahram Gur and the Seven Icons*, from the Anthology of Sultan Iskandar, Shiraz, Iran, 1410–1411. Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Inv. LA 161, fol. 66v



Plate 15 Yusuf Serves Zuleikha and Her Friends, in Jami, Yusuf and Zuleikha, Eliyahu ben Nisan ben Eliyahu'Gorgi, scribe, 1853, MS 1524, image 95. Courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary

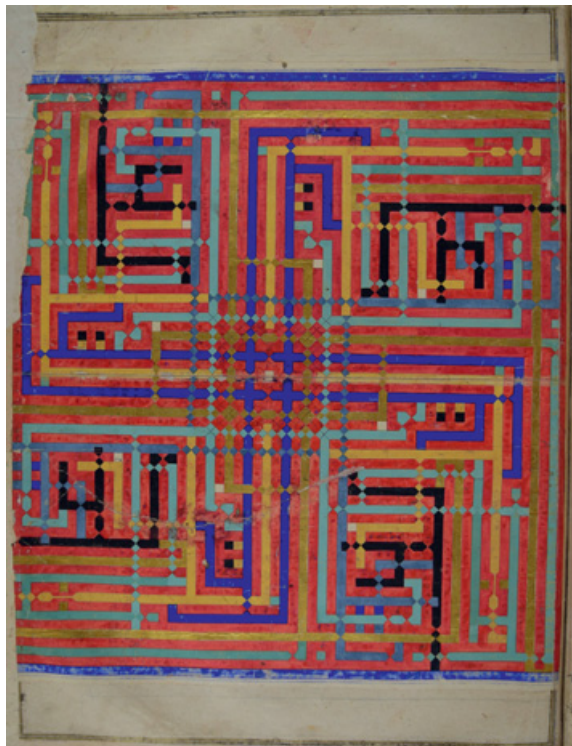


Plate 16 Anonymous, calligraphic panel, Album, c.1500. Topkapi Palace Museum, Istanbul, Hazine 2152, s. 9b

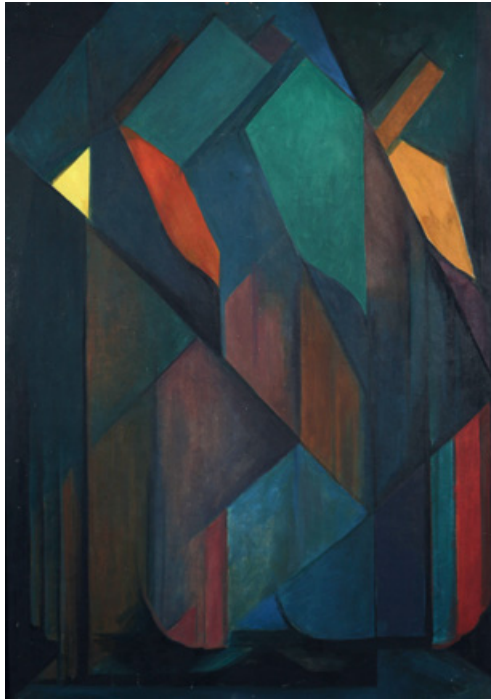


Plate 17 Halil Dikmen, *Ney Players*, 1933. Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University (MSGSÜ) Istanbul Museum of Painting and Sculpture



Plate 18 Slavs and Tatars, *Resist Resisting God* (gold), 2009. Mirror, plaster, wood, 100 × 150 × 10 cm. Courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation

mirror of the heart. This mirror offers an unreal space resembling that demonstrated by Parrhasius' theatrical curtains. His false curtain refuses access to a potential space of deception. Like Mani's dead dog, it remedies the danger of illusion by including the viewer in its game.

Yet in the Islamic context, this unreal space is not one of deception, but of transparent visual and cognitive reflection. As al-Ghazali says, "just as every object has a form whose image is impressed on becomes manifest in the mirror, so every knowable concept has a reality whose form is impressed upon and becomes manifest on the mirror of the heart."³⁵ It is through this manifestation, the coming-into-presence that takes place in the heart/mirror, that we as humans comprehend reality. The divine, as ibn Arabi points out, requires the cosmos as its mirror. The material world is not real. Rather, the reflection – not a deceptive representation, but a manifestation – is where Reality resides. What is on the painted wall becomes irrelevant because the story is about neither artists nor painting, but viewing. As with music, the theoretical concern over mimetic reception lies less in the object than in the polishing of the receptive organ, the heart, to receive the information provided by the eyes or the ears. Inward prevails over outward mimesis.

In contrast, European writers took up the story as an origin for art. Italian humanists used the story of Zeuxis and Parrhasius to model their understanding of the role of the artist as a "rivalry between technicians for the production of a replica so perfect that art will take the palm from nature."³⁶ Hartmann Schedel (1440–1514) included the story in his *Liber Chronicarum* (Book of Chronicles), published in Nuremberg in 1493. Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) developed it in his narration of art as a story of triumph and obsolescence between competing painters.

This model of art as a progression of masters and masterpieces does not reflect the process of Islamic artistic legacies. Rather than producing commercial rivals, the workshop system of the manuscript arts limited emphasis on individual artists. This frustrated some modern historians of Islamic arts who solved the problem of the relative paucity of named masters by emphasizing renowned artists such as the Persian Bihzad, the Ottoman Levni, or the Mughal Bichitr to define genres and eras. This master-based model does not reflect the interchange between artists, and the extent to which painting was often communal rather than competitive.³⁷ Such communal production reverberates with a repeated reluctance to choose winners in the stories about competition. Like Parrhasius' stage or Mani's dead dog, the mirrored

³⁵ Treiger, 2012: 32. ³⁶ Bryson, 1983: 1. ³⁷ Roxburgh, 2000.

reflection deceives doubly, undermining a premise of a deceptive image by marginalizing its agency.

Neither artist nor viewer masters deception; rather, the ability of each to perceive emerges only from the quality of their internal mirrors. Echoing ibn Sina's understanding of vision, Nizami Aruzi, a mid-twelfth-century poet who worked in the Ghaznavid court in Samarkand, describes the artistic imagination as "a faculty located in the posterior portion of the anterior ventricle of the brain, which preserves what the Composite Sense has apprehended from the external senses, so that this remains in it after the subsidence of the sense-impressions."³⁸ Thus the artist does not depict reality, but records an internalized reality potentially shared through the perceptual faculty of any sensory recipient.

If artist and viewer are both vessels of reception, then Reality is the agent impressing itself upon their perception. The painting becomes agent, creator, and actor; and the artist/viewer becomes the recipient who prepares the stage for reception by polishing the mirror of the heart. The act of perception becomes one deeply tied to the subjectivity of this recipient, whose affinity for apprehension relies on the clarity of the mirror. In the terms offered by Suhrawardi, it is only when the fortress of the body becomes suspended in the space of the mirror that it can surrender materiality and become accessed as the real. Within this system, paintings were designed to "evoke a pious response" rather than functioning as visual exegesis.³⁹ Thus the degree to which art is 'Islamic' comes from the culture of the viewer – their mirror – and not from the object itself.

This position lies in the blind spot of the paradigmatic relationship normative in European art history. Reflecting on the competition of Zeuxis as the primal narrative of Western art history, Bryson explains: "The world [that] painting is to resurrect exists *out there*, already, in the plenitude of its Being; and all the image is required to do is approximate as closely as possible the appearances of that plenary origin."⁴⁰ If we assume, as in the Sufi rendition of the story, that the world as it exists out there is only a reflection, the opposite of the plenitude of its Being (the Divine), the role of the image becomes not to approximate appearances, but to reveal the falseness of this apparent reality as a mere reflection. These worldviews are mutually exclusive: we cannot understand images conceived through a worldview of internal mimesis through one based on external mimesis.

The cultural relativism implicit in such a lens is difficult to discern because this relationship with the physical world frames an attitude toward

³⁸ Soucek, 1972: 11. ³⁹ Rizvi, 2017: 3. ⁴⁰ Bryson, 1983: 3.

knowledge conceived as natural. As Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) explains:

‘The’ world as reality is always there: at most it is here and there ‘other’ than I supposed it and should it be necessary to exclude this or that under the title ‘figment of the imagination’, ‘hallucination’, etc., I exclude it from this world which in the attitude of the general thesis is always the world existing out there. It is the aim of the sciences issuing from the natural attitude to attain a knowledge of the world *more comprehensive, more reliable, and in every respect more perfect than that offered by the information received by experience*, and to resolve all the problems of scientific knowledge that offer themselves upon its ground.⁴¹ (emphasis added)

One of the defining features of the modern subject is the willingness to deny the subjective reality of imagination, intuition, dreams and visions excluded from this supposedly ‘natural’ sociophilosophical structure of reality. We consider this denial as a necessary basis for truth.

Grounded in this notion, Bryson suggests that the purpose of art from antiquity to the modern period is an apparently natural progression toward increased verisimilitude:

Within the natural attitude, which is that of Pliny [and his inheritors in European art history], the image is thought of as self-effacing in the representation or reduplication of things. The goal towards which it moves is the perfect replication of a reality found existing ‘out there’ already, and all its effort is consumed in the elimination of those obstacles which impede the reproduction of that prior reality: the intransigence of the physical medium; inadequacy of manual technique; the inertia of formulae that impede, through their rigidity, accuracy of registration. The history of the image is accordingly written in negative terms. Each ‘advance’ consists of the removal of a further obstacle between painting and the Essential Copy: which final state is known in advance, through the prefiguration of Universal Visual Experience.⁴²

By this model, the image becomes the ‘window’ onto the world that ultimately becomes realized in the supposed mechanical veracity of the photograph.

This supposedly ‘natural’ attitude that denies subjective reality in favor of objective mastery over perception has roots less in antiquity than in the eighteenth-century deployment of antiquity as the foundation for modern aesthetics. An article by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) entitled “On truth and verisimilitude in works of art,” published in 1798 in the new art journal *Propyläen* presents a Platonic-style dialogue about

⁴¹ Quoted in Bryson, 1983: 5. ⁴² Bryson, 1983: 6.

the adaptation of a *trompe l'oeil* painting in a theatrical setting self-consciously reminiscent of the curtain drawn by Parrhasius. In a discourse replete with Platonism, Goethe establishes that “the Truth or reality of art” and “the truth of Nature” are different: art is “above nature,” yet not “outside nature.”⁴³ Reinterpreting “mimesis *qua* ‘imitation of nature,’” Goethe ignores the ‘inward’ aspect of antique mimesis, emphasizing instead the ‘outward’.⁴⁴ Goethe thereby expressed a modern role for art that would imitate nature with enough of a distinction from it to enable the viewer a higher consciousness through transcendence of its inherent deception.

Emphasis of the tale as a root of European art had emerged earlier, in the work of Joachim von Sandrart (1606–1688). A German artist who spent much of his life in Holland, Sandrart wrote the first German compendium of painting and art theory in 1673.⁴⁵ The Latin translation of 1683 included an expanded range of illustrations, among which were panels devoted to Plato’s myth of the cave and the two narratives associated with the painter Zeuxis: that of his depicting the most beautiful woman as a composite of models; and that of the competition. [Figure 5] The illustration grapples with the two realisms through the figure of a child whose shadow falls on a blank slate held in his hand as he looks at Zeuxis, about to try to open the curtain. Like the king in the Islamic competition narratives, Zeuxis must choose between the image that shows and the image that shows that it hides. Sandrart’s illustration underscores the demonstrative aspect of representation, which conditions the viewer to apprehend the layering of its deceptions. Goethe adopts this interpretation. Through this and an image on a preceding page depicting Plato’s cave, Sandrart emphasized two antique stories about representation in the ancient corpus that have become central to modern art history. However, this visualization discards the nuanced, often contradictory discussions of representation in Platonic dialogues, as well as in Seneca’s and Pliny’s ambivalent narratives about Zeuxis.

Goethe also incorporated aesthetics from Alexander Baumgarten’s *Reflections on Certain Matters Related to Poetry* of 1735. For Baumgarten, poetry offered a domain of “heterocosmic” fictions. The definition of such self-contained worlds likened the human to the divine creator. His ideas offered a “new concept and model of an autonomous and ‘disinterested’ realm of experience” that came to be described as ‘aesthetic’, a science of perception distinct from conceptual or intellectual cognition. This mode of

⁴³ Halliwell, 2002: 2. ⁴⁴ Halliwell, 2002: 3. ⁴⁵ Sandrart, 1675–1679.



Figure 5 Johann Jacob von Sandrart, *Zeuxis and Parrhasius*, in *Academia nobilissimae artis pictoriae*, 1683, v. 2, pl. C. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 3011–241

perception, central to the idea of ‘art’, secularizes Christian notions of the disinterested contemplation of divine beauty and goodness. In his *History of Ancient Art* (1764), tracing German to ancient Greek identity through Roman sculpture, Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) applied this model retroactively to Greece. Linking the amalgamation of beautiful parts from several models to produce the ideal beauty, he cites Xenophon’s description of dialogues between Socrates and Parrhasius, as well as Clito. Winckelmann misinterprets the dialogue’s ethics of depiction warning against the deceptive nature of verisimilitude. Instead, he says, “They purified their images from all personal feelings, by which the mind is diverted from the truly beautiful.”⁴⁶

Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790) monumentalized this chasm between sensory evaluation and subjective experience, laying the foundations through which modern art history would evaluate the objects

⁴⁶ Winckelmann, 1850: 51; Goldhill, 2010: 173.

of its attention. The trope of the palace serves as the template through which to establish the ideal of disinterested taste.

Suppose someone asks me whether I consider the palace I see before me beautiful. I might reply that I am not fond of things ... made merely to be gaped at. Or I might reply like that Iroquois *sachem* who said that he liked nothing better in Paris than the eating-houses. I might even go on, as *Rousseau* would, to rebuke the vanity of the great who spend the people's sweat on such superfluous things. I might finally, convince myself that, if I were on some uninhabited island with no hope of ever again coming among people, and could conjure up such a splendid edifice by a mere wish, I would not even take much trouble for it if I already had a sufficiently comfortable hut ... We easily see that, in order for me to say that an object is beautiful, and to prove that I have taste, what matters is what I do with this presentation within myself, and not the [respect] in which I depend on the object's existence. Everyone has to admit that if a judgement about beauty is mingled with the least interest then it is very partial and not a pure judgement of taste. In order to play the judge in matters of taste, we must not be in the least biased in favor of the thing's existence but must be wholly indifferent about it.⁴⁷

Rancière critiques this neutralization of the mastery of the owner against the lowly desire of the 'primitive' as a valorization of "the judgement of the petit-bourgeois intellectual who, free from the worries of work and capital, indulges him- or herself by adopting the position of universal thought and disinterested taste."⁴⁸ He proposes an imaginary diary entry from a French worker as an antidote to the position of mastery established by Kant:

Believing himself at home, [the worker] loves the arrangement of a room so long as he has not finished laying the floor. If the window opens out onto a garden or commands a view of a picturesque horizon, he stops his arms a moment and glides in imagination towards the spacious view to enjoy it better than the possessors enjoy it better than the possessors of the neighboring residences.⁴⁹

Rancière describes the politics of disinterest as unethical in purposefully excluding the contextual facts of ownership and labor establishing crucial bonds between subject and object. The solution comes from the reframing of the interested gaze through the eye of the worker, doubling the 'as if' upon which the possibility of aesthesis is based from one marginalizing ownership to one pretending it.

Artisans act as if they were at home in the house that they otherwise know is not theirs, as if they possessed the perspective of the garden. This 'belief' does not hide any reality. But it doubles this reality, which the ethical order would like to consider

⁴⁷ Kant, 1987: 45–46. ⁴⁸ Rancière, 2009b: 6. ⁴⁹ Rancière, 2006: 5.

as only *one*. As a consequence of this, they can double their working identities; to the identity of the worker at home in a defined regime can be added a *proletarian* identity – in other words, the identity of a subject capable of escaping the assignment to a private condition and of intervening in the affairs of the community.⁵⁰

Rancière observes that Kant's definition of the object of aesthetic appreciation "as neither an object of knowledge nor an object of desire" is predicated on the normalization of the bourgeois social order as part of a nascent colonial world order.⁵¹ Ironically, in foregrounding the erasure of class central to the disinterest of taste, he ignores the racialization of base desire through the primitivized Iroquois, unable to recognize the high culture of Paris except through the denigrated sense of taste. As Karen Lang points out, the subject whom Kant universalizes as the *Weltbetrachter* is both reasonable and "unabashedly European. If the purpose of Enlightenment is to release man from his 'self-incurred tutelage,' then that of enlightened European man is to bring those existing outside European civilization into 'history' through colonization ... the idealized subject of aesthetic judgment merges with the Kantian subject of history, for both move toward the same goal over the *longue durée*."⁵²

Thus the demand for art-historical disinterestedness toward its objects contributes to a narration of art that colonizes not only other cultural geographies, but also the premodern cultures that it subsumes within the modern notion of 'Western.'⁵³ It requires a disinterested subject that emerged through a modern, European process through which the field of perception was narrowed down to Baumgartner's invention of aesthetics, a neologism deceptively authenticated through its Greek etymology. This reduction transformed the inward mimesis favored in antiquity into the blind spot of modernity and veiled the Islamic inheritance of antique thought embodied in its inwardly mimetic subjectivity.

The ontology of inward mimesis depended on cultured sophistication just as much as the Kantian model, but functioned through the refinement rather than the rejection of interest and the valorization of intuition over reason. Obviating such a position, Kant proposes that

the judging person feels completely free as regards the liking he accords the object. Hence he will talk about the beautiful as if beauty were a characteristic of the object and the judgment were logical (namely, a cognition of the object through concepts of it), even though in fact the judgment is only aesthetic and refers the object's presentation merely to the subject. He will talk in this way because the judgment

⁵⁰ Rancière, 2006: 6. ⁵¹ Rancière, 2006: 1. ⁵² Lang, 1997: 435. ⁵³ Halliwell, 2002: 9–11.

does resemble a logical judgment inasmuch as we may presuppose it to be valid for everyone. On the other hand, his universality cannot arise from concepts. For from concepts there is no transition to the feeling of pleasure or displeasure ... It follows that, since a judgment of taste involves the consciousness that all interest is kept out of it, it must also involve a claim to being valid for everyone, but without having a universality based on concepts. In other words, a judgment of taste must involve a claim to subjective universality.⁵⁴

For Kant, reason opposes desire because it draws on a depersonalized position that anybody could fill. This personal remove from the object is the condition that enables aesthetic judgment as a universal value – held by everybody, everywhere. This space of disinterested objectivity, unmuddled by the bias of faith, emotion, or association, enables traditional art-historical analysis to assume the universal validity of its categorical and interpretive practices. Without knowing the intertextual associations within discourses, an attempt to use an emic text to diversify the sources of art history, such as Elkins' interpretation of Qadi Ahmad, cannot complete its mission. The premise of universal objectivity similarly has given confidence to art historians of the Islamic world that historical interpretation can fully elucidate cultural meaning. This is not any single individual's shortcoming; it is our cave, an epistemic premise on which the discipline relies.

This attitude makes a poor fit with Islamic discourses, rooted in diametrically opposite premises. In contrast to Kant, al-Ghazali considers the framework of sensation not as reason, but as love:

Another cause of love is that one loves something for its own sake ... To this category belongs the love of beauty ... Do not believe that love of beautiful forms is conceivable only for the satisfaction of sensual desire ... However, the perception of beauty also gives pleasure and can be loved for its own sake alone ... The reaction of every healthy constitution proves that the contemplation of flowers and birds and of a beautiful color, graceful design and form gives pleasure. On seeing them even worry and grief leave the human mind, though there is no benefit to be derived beyond the mere looking. These objects give pleasure and everything pleasurable is loved.⁵⁵

For him, love, not reason, is deeply embedded in the practices of cultivation enabling taste. No amount of reason can amount to cultivation. Rather, it is the intrinsic relationship with the object of beauty designated as pleasure that fosters love.

⁵⁴ Kant, 1987: 54. ⁵⁵ Ettinghausen, 1947; Necipoğlu, 1995: 192.

Similarly emphasizing subjectivity, ibn al-Haytham offers a paradigm of beauty rooted in manifold possibilities that can only be differentiated through subjective experience:

That it is these particular properties that separately produce beauty – and by ‘producing beauty’ I mean that they produce in the soul an effect such that the form appears beautiful – will be evident from a brief consideration. For light produces beauty, and thus the sun, the moon, and the stars look beautiful, without there being in them a cause on account of which their form looks beautiful and appealing other than their radiant light. Therefore, light by itself produces beauty.

Color also produces beauty. For every bright color, such as purple, purpure, vegetable-green, | rose ... and the like, appeal to the beholder and please the eye. Similarly, dyed clothes and covers and utensils, also flowers, blossoms and meadows, are felt to be beautiful. Therefore color by itself produces beauty.⁵⁶

Ibn al-Haytham continues, citing distance, motion, rest, roughness, smoothness, transparency, opacity, shadow, darkness, similarity, proportion, and harmony – many of which are contradictory, and emerge as beautiful in combination with each other. Then, he offers a consideration of the ugly:

As for ugliness, it is a [property of the] form from which all beautiful properties are absent. For it has been shown that the particular properties produce beauty but not in every situation nor in every form, but in some forms rather than others. Proportionality also exists not in all forms but in some rather than others. Therefore, beauty will be lacking from forms in which no particular properties produce beauty either singly or in conjunction, and in which no proportionality exists among the parts. Thus ugliness of form is the absence of beauty from it. There may exist in one and the same form both beautiful and ugly properties, and in this case sight will perceive their respective beauty and ugliness once it has distinguished and contemplated the properties in the form. But sight will perceive ugliness from the privation of beauty when perceiving forms from which all beautiful features are absent. And likewise for all ugly things.⁵⁷

Beauty and ugliness emerge from the tautological limits of the other, drawing on the rhetorical method of understanding through opposition, referred to by ibn Arabi as *tanzih*.⁵⁸ Ibn al-Haytham can only offer a list of qualities through which beauty may be apprehended, but ultimately the ability to distinguish between the beautiful and the ugly depends on the soul in which sensation is produced. Sabra notes that ibn al-Haytham continues the understanding of beauty (*al-husn*) adopted from Platonism

⁵⁶ Sabra, 1989: 200. ⁵⁷ Sabra, 1989: 206. ⁵⁸ Akkach, 2005a: 30.

and perpetuated in the thought of al-Ghazali, emphasizing moral, practical, or spiritual virtues. Yet in this discussion of a specifically aesthetic beauty, he uses the rare passive form of the word, *mustahsan*, emphasizing the subjective nature of aesthetic judgment.⁵⁹ The overarching inclusiveness of ibn al-Haytham's categories gives us little guidance if what we seek in aesthetics is a means to categorize quality or taste. Yet in providing a very different system of measurement, it disturbs and threatens our taxonomic habits.

Ibn Khaldun's description of taste similarly requires the deep apprehension of the subject of the situation at hand. In the *Muqaddima* (*Introduction to the Human Sciences*), he says:

It should be known that the word 'taste' is in current use among those who are concerned with the various branches of literary criticism. It means the tongue's possession of the habit of eloquence. What eloquence is, was explained above. It is the conformity of speech to the meaning (intended), in every aspect, (and this is achieved) by means of certain qualities that give this (conformity) to the word combinations.⁶⁰

A person of taste is so deeply embedded in the situation at hand that (s)he knows what to say intuitively, responding to the world through an "intuitive non-demonstrative process" of the sort described in Aristotelian, and later Avicennian, poetics. Including the allegory of the competition of the artists within an otherwise demonstrative text, al-Ghazali demonstrated the taste of an intellectual who knows how to address his reader with appropriate tools for the rhetorical job at hand. Similarly, in revising and elaborating the story with a plethora of allusions which recall a wide range of associations, from the Quran and Manicheism to the specific poetic imagery that traces through the discourse, each of the authors cited here asserted their taste, and thereby the validity of their knowledge of authority, through a demonstration of *mutabaqa*, conformity to a situation which involves "a neutral and objective comparison the purpose of which is not praise or satire ... [which] expressed a whole vision of the world according to which a divine order corresponded to a social and a linguistic order."⁶¹ Thus taste was conferred not by distance, but by situating a narrative within a discursive context, internalized by the subject, through which to apprehend the world.

Kantian disinterest depends on an externalization of the subject from the object similar to the outward mimesis of an image that represents an

⁵⁹ Sabra, 1989: 97. ⁶⁰ Ibn Khaldun, 1980: 358. ⁶¹ Lelli, 2014: 204.

absent object. It thereby precludes inward mimesis, in which the object touches the heart of the subject. Similarly, demonstrative language alone fails to communicate, and requires the allegorical communication made possible in narrative. Thus a secular, demonstrative art history that relies on information to reveal the truth of Islamic art veils its conceptual heart by occluding the subjective interpretation of parable and poetry.

The idea of the image in Islam does not require the external, material object necessary for art-historical analysis. Rather, the trope of the image emphasizes spiritually trained subjectivity. This resonates with the Quranic understanding of subjectivity as rooted in the heart, inverting the rationalist assumption that a thing precedes its image, and instead recognizing the image as real through the subjectivity of the perceiving agent. Yet far from immaterial, this inversion requires physicality to perform the unseen, sometimes transcendent and sometimes transgressive, in the space of dreams, visions, and disappearing realities.

The field of Islamic art history grew in tandem with European access to the material culture of regions of Islamic hegemony (and much of the rest of the colonized world). It categorized, identified, authenticated, and evaluated collected objects often incongruous with existing categories of high art. Although aiming to familiarize the plenitude of culture, this enterprise often transposes objects communicating within local discursive networks onto a system of knowledge rooted in Europe. Such transposition depletes culture by sifting and appropriating only what it recognizes. Perceptual culture becomes translated into art.

What is lost in translation? Stories about images in theological and literary discourses provide insight into how people thought about images. Unlike real objects, these imaginary images cannot function as commodities. They reflect neither fungible investment nor cultural capital. Images proliferate not before the eyes, but through words leaping and diving between texts, through languages, and across time. As transformative narrative elements, these images reflect magical more than sinful associations with visual representation. Rather than permanence, they acquire the fleeting sensory qualities, such as smell and touch, to which poetic descriptions of beauty often appeal.¹ This chapter examines images that transcend materiality, either by dematerializing or by never materializing at all.

7.1 The Image as Proof

Many stories use the trope of disappearing images to prove identity. Rather than thinking of images as things that might be collected or worshiped, these stories consider the image as evidence within the strategic arsenal of a wise ruler. The earliest use of the tale appears Pseudo-Callisthenes' Alexander romance (see [Chapter 1.1](#)). It relates that Queen Candace of Meroe commissions a Greek artist to secretly paint Alexander's portrait as she pays him tribute. However, she denies him a visit to her kingdom. A

few days later her son is attacked by foreign armies, who then kidnap his wife. He finds refuge in Alexander's camp. His advisor Ptolemy sits on his throne so that Alexander can disguise himself as his chief bodyguard. With his son, Alexander rescues the wife. They then become guests at Queen Candace's court. She uses the portrait to uncover Alexander's ruse. She asks, "Why are you so upset? You who have destroyed the Persians and the Indians, who have taken trophies from the Medes and Parthians, who have subdued the whole East – now, without a single battle, you have become the prisoner of Candace."² Nonetheless, in return for Alexander's support of her son, she shields him from the local armies that would kill him if his identity were revealed. He resolves a fight between her sons, winning her praise as a wise ruler, and is released with gifts.

Firdausi tells a similar tale, in which Queen Qaydāfeh of Andalusia commissions a full-length portrait of Alexander, who is in Egypt. She then spurns his written demand for tribute. Conquering a third kingdom where her son resides, Alexander intercedes on the son's behalf and prevents his execution, and then accompanies him in disguise to his mother's court. As his purported deputy, he demands tribute for Alexander in exchange for the son. Enraged, Qaydāfeh shows that he has uncovered his ruse by revealing the cloth portrait to him, where "if the painted face had moved at all you would have said that it was Sekandar himself!"³ She reveals that she maintains a large collection of portraits of foreign rulers as part of her command, and releases the humbled Alexander with a promise of peace.

Nizami's *Iskandarnamah* elaborates the story. Queen Nushabeh compensates for never having left her city, Barda, through a collection of portraits on silk cloths of all the kings of the world made by her dispersed artists and physiognomers. The accuracy of the portraits allows her to judge kings through her knowledge of physiognomy. Her judicious use of the paintings impresses Alexander, who muses that her refinement gives her the wisdom of a man rather than a woman, contradicting the slew of proverbs restricting a woman to the home inserted immediately after the story (through which he presumably restores a normative gender hierarchy).⁴ The frequent illustration of the scene in manuscripts of Nizami's work underscores its importance. [Figure 6] Many of these images depict the queen enthroned with Alexander before her and an identical portrait on display. She always holds court in a garden, reflecting the use of tents and outdoor spaces for imperial activities among formerly

² Stoneman, 1991: 136–140. ³ Ferdowsi, 2007: 495. ⁴ Nizami, 1991: 202.



Figure 6 Anonymous, *Queen Nushaba Recognizes Alexander from His Portrait*, from the *Khamisa* by Nizami of Ganj, 1485. Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, MS. Or. Quart 1665

semi-nomadic Turkic dynasties, and also probably underscoring the official, public, and non-romantic nature of their interaction.

Both Firdausi's and Nizami's stories use the image to underscore the prescience of female rulers described as the most powerful, wealthy, and beautiful of their eras. Both describe the palatial pomp, glorious clothing, and splendid settings as intimidating Alexander. The rulers are celebrated as exceeding restrictive gender stereotypes through their deployment of strategic wisdom instead of brute force. The extra-Islamic setting enables the inversion of both gender and the image, arguing against the binary sphere of permissibility or prohibition. Instead, in the hands of woman, the image becomes a pragmatic tool reflecting intelligence, key to Alexander's education as a paradigm of ideal governance in the Islamic world, the power of which emerges through its capacity to acquire transcultural knowledge.

The trope of the image as proof proliferated even more widely as an indicator of belief in Islamic prophecy for foreign rulers. *The News of Tiwal* by al-Dinawari (828–896) tells of an emissary from the caliph Abu Bakr to the king of Rum, aiming to convert him to Islam or declare war. After asking him about Islam, the ruler dismisses him for a day. When they meet again, an attendant brings in an object with many compartments, each containing a cloth portrait – first of the Prophet Adam, then of Noah, and finally of Muhammad himself. When the envoy responds by weeping, the king asks if it is the true image of the Prophet. Upon receiving confirmation, the king shows him the portraits of Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, and Jesus, explaining that the box came to him through the lineage of Alexander the Great.

Variants of this story persisted into the sixteenth century. Around 890–895, it appeared in the geography of ibn al-Faqih, entitled *The Book of Lands* (*Kitab al-Buldan*). Citing a lost 916 source by Abu Zahd Hassan from Siraf (on the Persian Gulf), in Masudi's mid-tenth century *Golden Meadows* (*Muruj al-Dhahab*), the story is transferred to China, where the images appear on a scroll. The prophets are identified by their attributes rather than their likenesses, and some are described as making a hand gesture reminiscent of *mudras*, suggesting that the story might describe the type of Tang era (618–917) scroll designed for Buddhist proselytization. In mid-eleventh century books entitled *Signs of Prophethood* (*Dala'il al-Nubuwwah*) by Abu Bakr Ahmad ibn al-Husayn al-Bayhaqi (d. 1043) and Abu Nu'aym al-Isfahani (d. 1058), the story was retold naming the ruler as Emperor Heraclius of Rome.⁵ This variant was further elaborated in the late fifteenth-century *Garden of Purity* (*Rawzat al-Safa*) by the Timurid historian Muhammad ibn Khvandshah ibn Mahmud.⁶

The trope also associates Adam with images. In his history, al-Tabari relates that Adam saw in the right hand of God his own picture along with “all his progeny and there was written down with God the term (of life) of each man).”⁷ A similar Jewish legend relates that God revealed the names of the prophets, teachers, and other religious leaders and heroes to come on a curtain hung in front of God.⁸

Yet such use of the image as proof ultimately could also be suspect, as shown in the trope's inversion in the biography of Jalal al-Din Rumi by Aflaki (c.1286–1360). He tells the story of Gurji Khatun, forced to leave Konya for Kayseri because she has fallen out of favor with her husband, the

⁵ Grabar, 2003. ⁶ Roxburgh, 2001: 172. ⁷ al-Tabari, 1998: 26.

⁸ Ginzberg, 1946: 61; Grabar, 2003: 26.

ruler. Unable to bear the distance from her spiritual master, Rumi, she hires a fellow disciple, the Christian painter ‘Ayn al-Dawla, to paint his portrait on paper. Yet no matter how many portraits he makes, the original continually changes, rendering his representation impossible.⁹ With this anecdote, Aflaki suggests the insufficiency of the image to represent life, much as Socrates recognizes the insufficiency of painting in *Phaedrus* (see [Chapter 6](#)).

This inherent insufficiency allowed for the legitimation of images, as in the *Book of Wonders (Ajaibnama)* by Nasr al-Din Tusi (1201–1274), a popular twelfth-century text from Anatolia, elements of which were retold in Dust Muhammad’s preface. Oya Pancaroğlu suggests that the diverse images in Tusi’s work

advance the idea that these miscellaneous wonders are conceptually unified in their mysterious testament to God’s will which manifests itself through the talismanic action of statues ... Expressed through a pious stance, Tusi’s validation of images seeks to realign human reason so that the wonder of images may be perceived as instruments of ethical instruction rather than as traps leading to idolatry. He relates the danger of idolatry to a weakness of the human will and not to the images themselves.¹⁰

Similarly, Dust Muhammad frames his discussion of a story about the ‘Chest of Witnessing’ with an acknowledgment that “the masters of depiction are ashamed before the manifest of Muslim law.”¹¹ He nonetheless valorizes painting through its association with the prophet Daniel, who acquires the chest, a relic made by God, from Alexander and copies all the portraits on silk. This valorization enables Dust Muhammad to assert: “Unquestionably depiction is not without noble lineage, and because of this the painter’s mind need not be scratched by the thorn of despair.”¹²

Yet false prophethood must be averted through the reflective recognition of the soul. Like Nizami, Dust Muhammad relies on the narrative of the *Artangi* Tablet – described as a span of silk showing a variety of living creatures – as an example of false proof, deceptive to those of impure hearts.

Those short-sighted ones, the mirror of whose hearts could not manifest the light of Islam out of extreme mulishness, were deceived by the figures on his plaything, and exhibited his painted silk, which was known as the *Artangi* Tablet, as their model of unbelief and perverseness, and strangest of all they held that the silk was equal to the Picture Gallery of China, which is famous, for it unites images of all of Creation’s forms.¹³

⁹ Elias, 2012: 98. ¹⁰ Pancaroğlu, 2003: 34, 40. ¹¹ Roxburgh, 2001: 172.

¹² Roxburgh, 2001: 173–174. ¹³ Roxburgh, 2001: 175.

The commentary echoes the Quran's frequent reference to non-believers as blind, as in: "It is not people's eyes that are blind, but their hearts within their breasts"¹⁴ (Q22:38). The problem lies not in the image itself but in the failure of the heart to recognize the insufficiency of the eye.

Mani's claim to truth is falsified by contrasting the Quran as the manifestation of truth. Not only does Mani imitate the revelation of the Prophet Muhammad by reenacting his meditative retreat into a cave where he receives divine inspiration, he references the heavenly tablet on which it was modeled. Whereas in Islam this form is aural, Mani's tablet is visual. For Dust Muhammad, the medium of image over sound undermines its claim to comprehensively represent the world. As in Nizami's rendition, the knowing heart suffices as protection against the dangers of depiction.

7.2 The Materiality of Dreams

Under the rubric of art, the image in modern thought becomes inextricable from materiality, equated with reality. Yet in Islamic poetry, the physical painting was no more or less real, permanent, or believable than a vision or a dream. This interchangeability between physically and spiritually manifest images becomes clear in the parallel functions of paintings and dreams as tropes driving action in poetic and historical narratives. Both a painting and a dream are equally ephemeral. This reflects the metaphysics established in the thought of ibn Sina, who conceives materiality as a contingent expression of essence, where essence is that which surpasses the accident of having come into being.¹⁵ As Akkach points out, for over a millennium Islamic discourses maintained the "Platonic–Aristotelian duality of the sensible and the intelligible, the physical and metaphysical ... The Islamic cosmos consisted of the seen and unseen, the divine and human domains, with each having its own inhabitants, landscape, and order."¹⁶ An ontology of the image in Islam must attend not only to physical paintings in collections, libraries, and museums, but also to narratives of images encountered in the unseen which affect physical reality.

Lest we exoticize this inversion of dream and reality, consider for a moment the work we moderns invest in telling ourselves that dreams are not real, our ideological investment affirming that experiences that deeply touch us are false. Then imagine the liberty that might come from paying attention to our dreams, not simply psychoanalytically, but in the

¹⁴ Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 212. ¹⁵ El-Bizri, 2001. ¹⁶ Akkach, 2005a: 3.

plenitude of a reality increasingly impinged upon by the virtual. Culture inscribes the boundaries of reality. An understanding of the veracity attributed to dreams in a non-modern episteme is essential to considering their relationships with images.

Central to Islamic revelation, visions – as well as their more mundane incarnations as dreams – play a vital role in texts from theology to literature. When the future Prophet Muhammad retreated for forty days into the Cave Hira, he sought some sort of spiritual experience: he had the idea that physical retreat from the world could enable it because his society believed in visions. Nonetheless, Sunni biographies of the Prophet claim he was initially terrified by the command of the angel Gabriel to “Read!” Convinced that people would think him possessed, he resolved to commit suicide. He ran home and asked his wife Khadijah to wrap him in his mantle for comfort. As he received a second revelation (Q74), she immediately recognized the truth of his vision. In this moment of recognition, she became the first witness, and thereby the first Muslim.¹⁷ Like us moderns, people were skeptical. But visions, like miracles in the Christian tradition, could function as proof.

After three years of further meditation, the Prophet began to experience regular revelations. This included visionary travel believed to take place not in a sleeping dream, but in a state of wakefulness, first (*‘isra*) to “the furthest place of worship” (associated with Jerusalem in some early biographies of the Prophet) on the winged and human-headed steed Buraq, and from there the ascent to heaven (*mi’raj*). The Quran equates this visionary experience with God’s giving the tablets to Moses (Q17:1–2). Since the vision is not a revelation, but an experience, the Quran alludes to rather than describing it (see also Q17:60 and Q53:13–18). Biographies, *Hadith*, and literature build on the basic narrative, including a Persian prose rendition by ibn Sina and one in Arabic by ibn Arabi, describing his mystical vision of the vision.

Depictions of the Prophet Muhammad soaring through golden heavens on the back of Buraq during the *mi’raj* became a favorite illustration in biographies of the Prophet, as a frontispiece for poetic works and albums, and in dream manuals and books of divination (*falnamah*).¹⁸ [Plate 10] Its inclusion in poetry books, such as the painting from a sixteenth-century manuscript of the *Bustan* (*Fruit Orchard*) of Sa’di, underscores the intimate relationship between poetry and the religious discourses it elaborates. While the depiction of the Prophet on his steed sailing among golden

¹⁷ Shi’a conceive of him as preordained, and therefore not disquieted. ¹⁸ Green, 2003: 293.

clouds and attentive angels on his way to heaven is quite common, this painting also shows the origin of the golden flame on a stool located in a mihrab, indicating the locus of Islamic prayer. Like the lamp frequently depicted in a mihrab, the flame may have Shi'a associations with the holy imamate.¹⁹ The presence of the three Sufis as witnesses to the divine event is symbolized through their sleep, a time when visitations from prophets or earlier masters would indicate their spiritual attainment.

While some scenes, including the *mi'raj*, were depicted frequently enough in Islamic painting to establish a standard visual iconography, iconographic codes proliferated far more readily in textual dream manuals that interpreted mental images as signs for worldly actions. Such practices were grounded in oneiric passages of the Quran, where Abrahamic prophets use dream interpretation to realize their prophecy: Yusuf (Q12:100), and Isaac (Q37:83–113).²⁰ If there is anything resembling the iconographic method dominating modern art history in Islamic cultures, it might be these dream manuals. Much as Erwin Panofsky's 1939 *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* integrated cultural interpretation into formalist art history, these dream manuals provide a symbolic structure through which to decode dreams, based on close readings of the Quran as well as many pre-Islamic Mesopotamian sources.²¹ The proliferation of an iconography of dreams more studied than an iconography of images in the Islamic world underscores a comparable process of deductive analysis of the visual directed less toward outward than toward inward mimesis. The enumeration of dream typologies underscores both the differences between the potential content of dreams across eras and the possibility that by expecting specific meanings from dreams, one might direct them. Indeed, Suhrawardi offers a pragmatic approach to dreams, suggesting that Sufi aspirants (*fuqara*, meaning literally the destitute, but figuratively those in recognition of the impoverishment of mundane existence) should express a "Prayer of Incubation" before sleep in order to ascertain the correctness of their intention to travel beyond the worldly realm.²²

Underpinning the veracity of his Prophetic experience, records of Muhammad's sleeping dreams appear in the *Hadith*. He is said to have initiated the ritual call to prayer through the human voice because of a dream.²³ Suggestive of the *nasib* style of the ode (*qasida*) of pre-Islamic Arabia, in which the poet rests only to be haunted by visions of his future

¹⁹ Mulder, 2014: 81. ²⁰ Green, 2003: 289. ²¹ Sirriyeh, 2011. ²² Ohlander, 2012: 204.

²³ Green, 2003: 290.

beloved, A'isha reported that the Prophet said to her, "You have been shown to me twice in a dream, I saw you pictured on a piece of silk, and someone said, this is your wife."²⁴ Similarly, dream visions of the Prophet were understood as true. Al-Bukhari cites a *Hadith* that the Prophet assured his followers that Satan could not take his form, such that if they saw him in a dream, it was truly him. For this reason, dreams of the Prophet carried legal weight.²⁵

The Quran contextualizes even non-revelatory, normal sleeping dreams in terms of divine engagement, explaining that God calls the souls of the dead and of the living in their sleep, and only returns them to those who continue to live (Q6:60, 39:42). All dreaming thus involves a real displacement of the soul in a nightly encounter with the divine. As indicated in a *Hadith* related by al-Bukhari (91:5), the dream is what is left to the world now that the last prophet, Muhammad, has died: "Prophecy has passed, and only the bearers of good tidings remain – good dreams which a man sees or which are shown him in his sleep."²⁶

Because dreams provided a real encounter with truth, they served as ethical guides for worldly action. The bibliographer Abu'l-Faraj Muhammad bin Ishaq al-Nadim (d. c.998) claimed that the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun dreamed of Aristotle lecturing him on the good, leading him to promote the rapid production of books.²⁷ Musical composers dreamed inspiration for great works.²⁸ Like apprentices, poets trained for their profession through dreams.²⁹ Instigating changes in behavior, journeys, and important actions, dreams became central to autobiographical and conquest narratives, enhancing the righteousness of any action including the right to rule through oneiric verification of God's intentions.³⁰

In these discourses, dreams present images more meaningful than paintings. Al-Farabi suggests that the soul thinks in images that originate in the divine active intellect, are manifest in dreams, and thus serve clairvoyant or even prophetic purposes. Ibn Sina affirmed this, seeing the prophetic dream as an act of providence.³¹ For him, the imagination becomes trustworthy during sleep because it is not distracted by the senses, only possible for prophetic people during wakefulness.³² Ibn Khaldun repeated this wisdom, explaining: "When the surface of the body ... is covered by the chill of night, the spirit withdraws from all the other regions of the body to its center, the heart ... [which is] the vehicle of man's

²⁴ Green, 2003: 289; Elias, 2012: 12. ²⁵ Green, 2003: 292.

²⁶ von Grunebaum and Caillois, 1966: 7. ²⁷ Green, 2003: 292. ²⁸ Necipoğlu, 1995: 197.

²⁹ Mancini-Lander, 2012. ³⁰ von Grunebaum and Caillois, 1966: 10–13.

³¹ Green, 2003: 292. ³² Lelli, 2014: 213.

rational spirit.”³³ In contrast to the modern understanding of the dream as ephemeral and irrational, this discourse ascribes longevity and reason to dreams. A Persian commentary on the thought of ibn Sina explains: “This faculty is thus as it were their treasury so that if the sensible thing itself disappears this figure and this form do not cease to subsist in it.”³⁴ Similarly, reflecting on the ruins of pre-Islamic civilizations encountered near Baghdad, al-Jahiz (776–868) indicated that the mortality of the material world made preservation impossible except in the recycling of thought enabled through books: “The composing of books is more effective than building in recording the accomplishments of the passing ages and centuries. For there is no doubt that construction eventually perishes, and its traces disappear, while books handed from one generation to another, and from nation to nation, remain forever renewed.”³⁵ Living in Baghdad during the Abbasid augmentation of power through libraries, translation, and the development of new commentaries on existing philosophical traditions, al-Jahiz conceives of the transmission of knowledge not through the physical maintenance of books, but through the incorporation of their content in new ones. Similarly, Persis Berlekamp explains that in the medieval world objects were understood as mutable, subject to corruption and decay. Therefore images served not to demonstrate reality, but to point to the Platonic abstraction of truth.³⁶ This idea resembles the role of Jewish Midrash, “the corpus of Jewish scriptural exegesis that [seeks out] meanings from the core text of the culture in order to keep the text perpetually relevant.”³⁷ In both epistemes, the stability of human creation, text or object, is less important than the perpetual renewal of meaning.

The sentiment persisted across the centuries, as the Timurid historian Mirkhwand (1433–1498) suggests:

Buildings may be seen
Ruined by sun and rain.
Erect history’s strong foundation
To escape from wind, rain, and desolation.³⁸

In contrast to our modern cultural emphasis on material preservation, such comments associate materiality with perishability, therefore preserving faith transitively through reuse.

The relative permanence of dreams comes from awareness of the here-after. Although the suprasensory world of sleep is fleeting as we live our

³³ Ibn Khaldun, 1991: 368. ³⁴ Soucek, 1972: 12. ³⁵ Necipoğlu, 1995: 38.

³⁶ Berlekamp, 2011: 177–178. ³⁷ Bernstein, 2006: xi. ³⁸ Necipoğlu, 1995: 38.

ephemeral current lives, it becomes the permanent postmortem world. As al-Ghazali explains in his *Alchemy of Happiness*:

[The human] five senses are like five doors opening on the external world; but, more wonderful than this, his heart has a window which opens on the unseen world of spirits. In the state of sleep, when the avenues of the senses are closed, this window is opened and man receives impressions from the unseen world and sometimes foreshadowings of the future. His heart is then like a mirror which reflects what is pictured in the Tablet of Fate. But, even in sleep, thoughts of worldly things dull this mirror, so that the impressions it receives are not clear. After death, however, such thoughts vanish and things are seen in their naked reality, and the saying in the Koran is fulfilled: "We have stripped the veil from off thee and thy sight today is keen."³⁹

In his *Bezels of Wisdom* (*Fuḥus al-Hikam*), meditations on the sacred qualities of each prophet in a divine lineage, ibn Arabi expresses the relationship between sleep and death by quoting the Prophet Muhammad as having said, "Men sleep and when they died they shall awake."⁴⁰ Thus earthly existence is merely a dream, and dreams are breaches into wakefulness.

Although early Sufis recognized dreams as penetrating the unseen, Suhrawardi, who also dreamt of Aristotle, was the first to describe dreams comprehensively in spatial and Quranic terms. For him, visions and lesser dreams take place in the intermediate world of suspended images (*'alam al-mithal al-mu'allaqa*), located between that of concrete phenomenal reality and the realm of pure intellect, the world of likenesses (*'alam al-mithal*) which possess form, but not substance – the same realm as that behind the looking glass. The ambiguity of the word *mithal* as a similitude, parable, or allegory also suggests that this intermediary world relates instructive stories, a means of reading through the physicality of words toward their teachings.⁴¹

Suhrawardi describes this dream world as a physical space through the adoption of the term *barzakh* from the Quran to indicate a boundary or veil between levels of light which structure being and awareness, dividing the realm of suspended images and that of likenesses.⁴² Originally meaning isthmus or interface, *barzakh* represents the barrier between the physical and spiritual worlds in which the soul waits after death and before resurrection on Judgment Day (Q23:100). Yet it is also more symbolically the barrier between salt and fresh water, juxtaposed first with the necessary order of divine creation and of kinship (Q25:53) and later with the

³⁹ al-Ghazali, 1993: 22. ⁴⁰ Austin, 1980: 121. ⁴¹ Bier, 2008: 507.

⁴² Khismatuln, 2017: 689; Karbassian, 2017: 92.

distinction between the creation of humans from clay, like pottery, and the *jinn*, out of smokeless fire (Q55:14–20).

A smokeless, reduction fire is used for the production of luster, an iridescent sheen that makes the surface of a pot appear more ethereal than material. Associated with *jinn* – supernatural, invisible, and yet material spirits believed to populate creation – smokeless fire embeds inexplicable wonder in creation. While the Quran might reference the technique through its use by potters in pre-Islamic Coptic Egypt, under the Abbasids this technology was used to make ceramic wares of unstable appearance that could be understood through an aesthetic vocabulary of wonder (*‘ajab*) related to a color (*abu kalamun*) indicating mutability found naturally in birds with iridescent feathers, chameleons, or mollusks.⁴³ Thus the magical visual qualities of lusterware suggest, through the process of their production, the unique nature of divine creation of both human and non-human beings. Similarly, the frequent practice of making form ambiguous, such as where an object recalls architecture or an animal, suggests the mutability of materiality against a backdrop of the absolute divine [see [Chapter 2.3](#)]. Some Sufi festivals involved the construction and destruction of elaborate forms out of sugar and other temporary materials point to the liminality of matter, both celebrating material pleasure while emphasizing its ephemerality.⁴⁴ The phenomenon of analogous inkwells and architecture, often underscored by the use of the same inscriptions, suggests liminality between text and matter, referencing the material world as that which has been written – a world that is contained in the Quran, and ultimately provides an analogue of divine will.⁴⁵ Similarly, the common poetic analogue between liquids and solids suggests a perpetually liminal, atomistic worldview. Functioning by inference rather than iconography, such signs depend less on fixed significations than on practices of internalized recognition informed through a subject’s discursive–spiritual environment.

‘Ajab superseded mere wonder. Al-Jurjani defined it as a change in the soul (*nafs*) through something the cause of which is unknown and is out of the ordinary. Echoing Platonic and Aristotelian associations between wonder and philosophy, Qazvini defined it as “the sense of bewilderment a person feels because of his inability to understand the cause of a thing.”⁴⁶ The definitions offered by North African lexicographer ibn Manzur (1233–1312) suggest an ambivalence at the heart of wonder: while he associates

⁴³ Carboni, 2001: 51. ⁴⁴ Graves, 2018: 10–16. ⁴⁵ Graves, 2018: 95–140, 207.

⁴⁶ Berlekamp, 2011: 22.

the noun '*ajab* with rejection of that which is perceived strange or abnormal, he associates the verb with chaotic temptation and delight. He adds that "the attribution of '*ajab* to God is considered to be metaphorical because the causes of things are not hidden from Him and *ta'ajjub* (the feeling of wonder) arises from things whose causes are hidden and have not been discerned."⁴⁷ Thus wonder was a desirable aesthetic quality because it produced a reminder of the divine in a space beyond comprehension, conceived above that of mere reason.

Dreams and imagination allowed access to this domain beyond reason. The cosmology of ibn Arabi depends on *barzakh* as the intermediary between absolute Being (God) and non-being. This becomes manifest in a world divided into three realms: the world of the unseen ('*alam al-ghayb*) abstract meanings, inhabited with angelic forms and spiritual beings; the world of the 'seen' (*alam al-mithal*), of corporal beings, senses, and sensible forms and bodies that we inhabit; and the world of imagination ('*alam al-khiyal*) that mediates between the two. As summarized by Akkach:

It is the place where the spirituality 'unseen' is integrated into the corporeality of the 'seen' to create the imagination. It is the ontological level at which spirits manifest matrices, and abstract meanings take on their bodily forms. The world of imagination is the world of dreams where everything is real yet, like a phantom, untouchable and unreachable. Imaginable forms, like dreams, have an apparitional or phantasmal quality: they are perceivable, meaningful forms physical presence. They are neither purely sensible nor purely abstract. Like an image in a mirror, it is visible, yet not there; it is visible but without a body; and like an illusive mirage, it exists but can never be reached.⁴⁸

Similarly, Mulla Sadra (1571–1640), central in the integration of Suhrawardian Illuminationist philosophy with Twelver Shi'a theology, builds on the thought of a follower of ibn Arabi, Dawud ibn Mahmud al-Qaysari (d. 1350), to differentiate between the 'formal unveiling' and the 'intellectual unveiling' of the believer. The former takes place through the 'inner five senses,' including hearing revelation as articulated speech, a ringing bell, or a bee buzzing. The latter involves the immediate appearance of the unseen realities to the perceivers, either through intuition or through direct divine revelation.⁴⁹

Barzakh thus undermines oppositions and enables recognition beyond our physical, sensory world. Although impenetrable, it holds the key to meaning. Much as the Derridian supplement unlocks the apparently equal

⁴⁷ Saba, 2012: 196. ⁴⁸ Akkach, 1993. ⁴⁹ al-Kutubi, 2013: 39.

binary pairing to reveal a hidden hierarchy within, *barzakh* is the space of the dream or the mirror via which, through an inversion of the logic of the concrete world, we achieve greater comprehension.⁵⁰ As the intermediary between God's non-delimited knowledge and our fragmentary understanding that results from being embedded in the concrete world, *barzakh* also functions like the Lacanian mirror, in which we envision ourselves, and our projection of others, as complete and whole in a manner that we cannot experience in the disjointed realm of our inevitably insufficient body in the real world. While we are alive and able to return, *barzakh* functions as a space through which we pass in order to contextualize knowledge of the physical world in relation to the beyond. Both Suhrawardi and ibn Arabi understood imagination as ultimately taking the place of sense perception in the real world. Following ibn Sina in a position that al-Ghazali found heretical in its denial of Quranic literalism, ibn Arabi went so far as arguing that the torments of hell and pleasures of heaven functioned as postmortem images.⁵¹

Dream images thus offered an important isthmus into divine truth. Building on ibn Sina's understanding of the composite sense, the thirteenth-century theologian Nasir al-Din al-Baidawi (d. 1296) explained the interpretation of the sleeping dream while explicating the Quranic Sura of Joseph:

Ru'ya is like *ru'yatun* except that the former is specially appropriate to what occurs in sleep. The distinction between the two forms is effected by means of the two alternative feminine affirmatives, as in *qurbatun* and *qurba*. *Ru'ya*, 'vision,' is the impression of an image which is communicated from the realm of the imagination to the *sensus communis*. Truthful visions occur only by means of a contact of the soul with the supernatural world due to the mutual affinity which exists between the two when the soul is to any extent freed from preoccupation with the control of the body, so that it is impressed with an image of concepts which exist there in the supernatural world, in so far as these are adapted to that soul's capacity. Thereafter, the imaginative faculty embodies the concept in an image appropriate to it, and communicates this image to the *sensus communis*, and the image becomes, as it were, 'observed.' Moreover, if the image bears so strong a resemblance to the concept that they are differentiated from each other by no more than the general and the particular, the vision needs no interpretation. Otherwise, it will need it.⁵²

In capturing a vision of essence, the dream image communicates a reality otherwise foreclosed in the mundane sentient world. Although, like a painting, a dream image is itself contingent, what it represents is not. Because of this, it gains a quality of the self-evident essence that it brings forth: truth.

⁵⁰ Almond, 2004: 34. ⁵¹ Sinai, 2015: 281. ⁵² Beeston, 1963: 3–4.

Several centuries later, the popular and last great book of dream interpretation, written by the Ottoman Hanafi jurist ‘Abdalghani al-Nablusi (1641–1713), a shaykh in the Qadiriyya and Naqshibandi Sufi orders, reflects a similar mechanistic description of the structure of dreams.

Man sees dreams with the spirit and understands them with the intelligence ... When a man sleeps, his spirit spreads like the light of a lamp or the sun. By this light and the brightness of God he sees that which the angel of dreams shows him ... When the senses are reawakened to their activities, the spirit is reminded of what the angel of dreams has shown and suggested to it.⁵³

Functioning like a photograph of the other world encountered in sleep, and like that other equipotent ambassador from the unseen world, the Quran, the dream imprints itself not rationally, but suprasensorially. The absolute, unplanned presence that this surreal image offers guarantees an authenticity far more stable than any mere material image, mediated by human agency, could offer.

7.3 Exile and the Seven Sleepers

Dreams indicated displacement not only across the realms of the material and the spiritual, but our mundane, waking experiences of displacement. In his commentary on the dream cited above, Baidawi points this out in his grammatical comparison between the dream and the highly resonant forms of *gh-r-ba* in Arabic. *Gh-r-ba* refers to the West (*gharb*) as the space of the setting sun, as opposed to the East (*shark*), the land of the rising sun. Identified with mystical illumination in Suhrawardi’s Eastern/Enlightenment (*ishraqi*) philosophy, the notion of the orient comes to signify proximity to the divine. In contrast, *ghurba* indicates notions of estrangement, exile, or homesickness, particularly in Suhrawardi’s treatise *Tale of the Occidental Exile* (*Qissas al-Ghurba al-Gharbiyya*), where the West is represented as the world of matter and darkness in which we are trapped.⁵⁴ In his *Meccan Revelations*, ibn Arabi complicates the concept by asserting that the true home of humankind is with God in paradise, and thus our experience in this world is one of permanent alienation (*ghurba*) in which all places are also equally home.⁵⁵ This sense of alienation is conveyed in the connotations of *gharib*, meaning strange, but also applying to somebody excluded and deserving sympathy. It also functions as a

⁵³ von Grunebaum and Caillois, 1966: 9. ⁵⁴ Moris, 2003: 47. ⁵⁵ El-Khachab, 2010.

subset of rare and wondrous things (*‘ajab*).⁵⁶ The moniker was adopted by Sufi poets who took on the identity of the excluded to express otherworldly wisdom.

Several Sufi thinkers, including al-Hallaj and al-Shushtari (1212–1269), associate the state of *ghurba* with the Seven Sleepers and their state of perpetual wakefulness, *tawakkul*, the mental state of perfect abandonment to God in which God speaks to them, a model for *ghurba*, “a life of love within death.” Recognizing the passage, regularly recited during the communal Friday prayer, as the heart of Islamic faith, the Orientalist Louis Massignon (1883–1962) explains that “those who thus sacrifice their life, like those who sacrifice in a persecution, are not the dead, but the living. They are resuscitated.”⁵⁷

This understanding emerges directly from the Quranic rendition of a Syriac homily.⁵⁸ Related by a Christian bishop named Jacob of Sarug (d. 521 CE), the most famous late antique version of the narrative tells of the Roman emperor Decius who orders everybody in Ephesus to sacrifice to the pagan gods. Some boys of leading families refuse, are denounced, sentenced to flogging, and escape to a nearby cave. There they pray to God, who raises their spirits to heaven and sends an angel to watch over them as Decius orders the cave’s entrance to be walled in. When the boys awaken, one goes to buy bread in town. There, he discovers that his coins are 372 years old, and Ephesus has become Christian. The emperor Theodosius offers to build a shrine at the cave, but the boys decline, declare their experience to be truth of the resurrection, and enter eternal sleep as the emperor covers them with his mantle.⁵⁹

The tale reappears with minor modifications as the second-longest continuous narrative in the Quran. Whereas the Syriac version thematized resurrection, thereby recognizing Jesus as the son of God (which constitutes the primary Islamic objection to Christian doctrine), the Quran frames the narrative by warning against those asserting that “God has offspring” (Q18.4). The story of the Companions of the Cave follows, first in abridged form, and then as an explicated narrative. It relates how an indeterminate number of young believers were called on to worship other gods, and God offers them refuge in the cave.

17. You could have seen the [light of the] sun as it rose, moving away to the right of their cave, and when it set, moving away to the left of them, while they lay in the wide space inside the cave. (This is one of God’s signs: those people God guides are the rightly guided, but you will find no protector to lead to the right path those he

⁵⁶ Berlekamp, 2011: 23. ⁵⁷ Massignon, 1969: 150. ⁵⁸ Griffith, 2008: 109.

⁵⁹ van der Horst, 2011: 107–108.

leaves to stray) 18. You would have thought they were awake, though they lay asleep. We turned them over, to the right and the left, with their dog stretching out its forelegs at the entrance. (Q18:17–18)⁶⁰

God eventually wakes them, and they wonder how long they have been sleeping. Settling on the answer that God knows best, one of them takes his silver coins to town to buy some food without disclosing their identity, lest they still be captured and forced to convert. “In this way We brought them to people’s attention so that they might know that God’s promise [of resurrection] is true and that there is no doubt about the Last Hour, [though] people argue among themselves” (Q18:21). The theme initially foreshadowing the resurrection of Jesus comes to indicate the resurrection of all of humanity on Judgment Day. As in the Syriac version, the people seek to erect a building or place of worship over them and argue about their number. The moral of the story, indicated by one of the Sleepers, is to say “My Lord knows best” and “do not say of anything, ‘I will do that tomorrow’ without adding ‘God willing’” (Q18:22) – the statement of which, in the phrase *inshallah*, is ubiquitous in the Islamic world. The Quranic text repurposes a cult devoted to the affirmation of Jesus’ divinity into one that reaffirms the unitary omniscience and omnipotence of God.⁶¹ The story became elaborated in commentaries, most famously by the historian al-Ya’qubi (d. 897), who describes the Sleepers as accompanied by a shepherd and his dog, named Qatmir.⁶² Often denigrated in recent Islamic discourses, the dog is added to Islamic renditions of the scene which otherwise adopt an iconography recognizable from Christian manuscripts [Figure 7].

Al-Hallaj interpreted the parable as refusing all worship not directly uniting with God. In addition to his more famous utterance “I am truth,” his coded message to his shaykh to “destroy your Kaaba,” meaning to destroy the importance of self as the last barrier from God, was interpreted as political support of the Qarmatian attack on the Kaaba in Mecca. He was executed in 922, a year identified by the Isma’ilis as the year of “the Awakening of the Seven Sleepers,” indicating the Mahdi’s second coming. The comparison between his death and the crucifixion is reflected in the iconography of witnessing shared with European examples and employed in an early sixteenth-century Mughal *Divan* of the poet and hagiographer Hasan Dihlawi, a close friend of Amir Khosrau, to commemorate his martyrdom [Figure 8].⁶³

⁶⁰ Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 184.

⁶¹ Reynolds, 2006: 720.

⁶² Donner, 2008: 36 n. 85.

⁶³ Hanif, 2002: 189.



Figure 7 Anonymous, *The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus Discovered by Alexander the Great*, from a *Book of Omens*, 1550s, 58 × 45 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 35.64.3

The question of idolatry shifts from the literal worship of objects as divine to the exaltation of forms and practices as unassailable. Al-Hallaj or Sa'di would demand our willingness to relinquish all that we hold sacred – as the American Beat poets of the 1950s suggested, to kill our darlings – to achieve true insight. Iconoclasm itself, when used as a proof of piety, results in self-promotion or self-worship, and itself becomes an idol. As Nizari Quhistani (1247–1321) explains of his resistance to court patronage, “I am a word-burner, not a word-spinner, a speech-consumer, not a speech-writer: iconoclasm is different from iconolatry.”⁶⁴ Thus the poet works

⁶⁴ Lewisohn, 2003: 231.

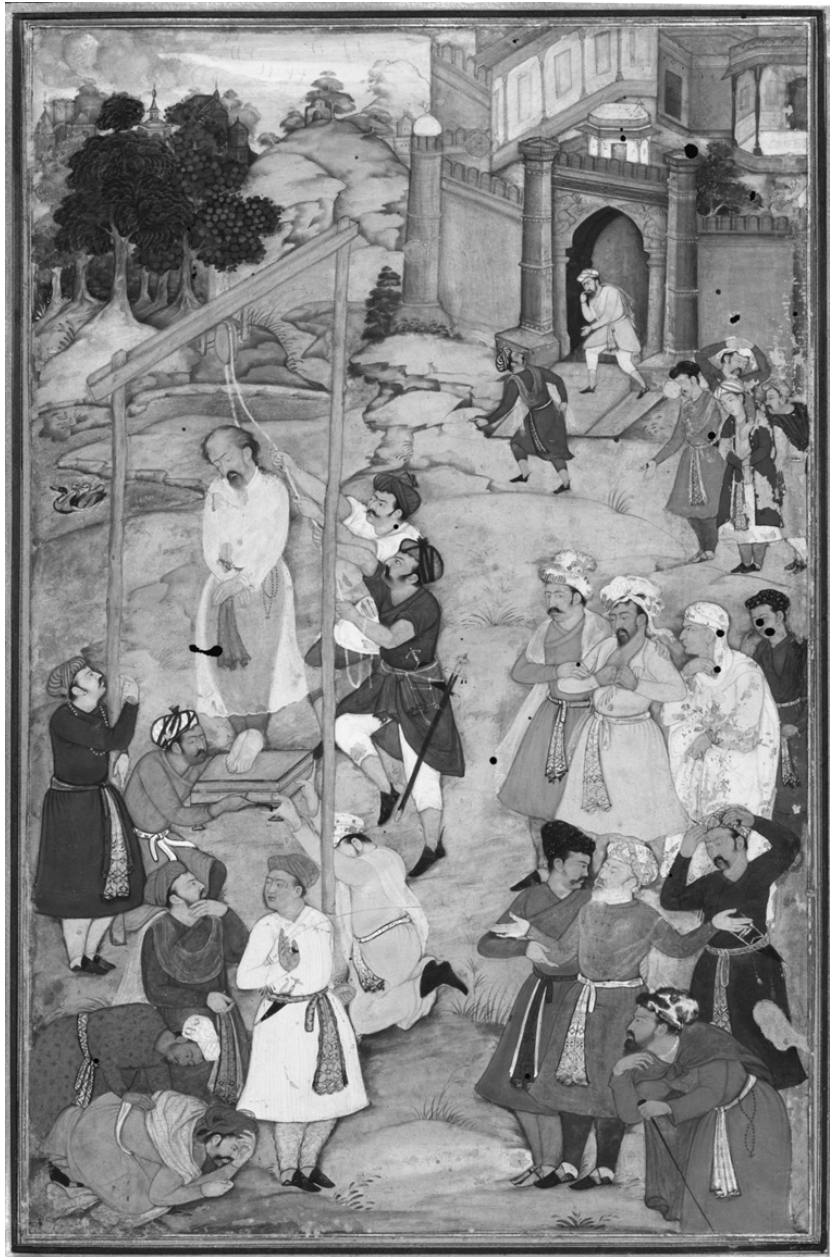


Figure 8 Anonymous, *The Hanging of Mansur al-Hallaj*, from the *Divan* by Khosrau Dihlavi, Allahabad, India, 1602. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, W.650.22B

indirectly with a widespread understanding of idolatry not simply as idol worship, but as a broader ethical demand to maintain a critical distance from the sacrosanct.

The blessing of exile in the intermediate world of sleep depends on rejecting idolatry. Our era is not that different from the one preceding World War II, in which Massignon found succor in the parable. Writing today, as neoliberalism appropriates isolationist and racist populism to conquer the global political stage, imperiling liberalism and intellectualism, the story of the Seven Sleepers feels like a ray of hope: an escape from the difficult political labor of resistance. I doubt I am alone in wishing I could sleep in a cave for a while, until things get better.

Yet if, like ibn Arabi, we understand the cave not as sleep but as exile, and exile not as physical uprooting but the recognition of all our homes as ephemeral, then the cave becomes not a place of retreat but a place of engagement. We gain critical alertness based on our ability to reject the ideologies embedded in our idols. As in al-Hallaj's incitement to "destroy your Kaaba," this rejection forces us to put the sacrosanct object on the chopping block for evaluation, as did Abraham.

As an idol, art history does not simply reflect ideologies of content, such as nationalism or patriarchy, as has long been critiqued, but also of method. It assumes that art is necessarily a physical entity endowed with the capacity to act as a metonym for some greater reality. What if we destroy this Kaaba and, at least temporarily, step out of the art-historical cave?

This *barzakh* of interpretive meditation allows us to consider how rhetoric mediates our relationship with things. The rhetoric of art history is grounded in empirical historicism, situating its object of study along the vectors of time and geography. In contrast, ideologies such as religion and nationalism rely on symbolic rhetoric to communicate parables about how to live. By marginalizing this mechanism of conveying knowledge, we construct an edifice of demonstrative expertise at the cost of allegory. This reduces the efficacy of empirical knowledge in the public sphere. We expect popularizers or creative professionals, to take up our work, to manipulate our research willy-nilly, and communicate it somehow in the form of public narrative, as documentary, fiction, exhibition, or art. We then complain that, perhaps unable or unwilling to read our long, academic texts (including this book), they did it wrong. When we lose the symbolic range of our rhetorical toolbox, we also lose our self-authorization to communicate through the rhetorical range of the entities we study. In doing so, we occlude the expressive agency of artists and their artworks. Empiricism applied to art dooms it to silence.

The story of the cave also suggests the need for a symbolic space for retreating from the material world to understand it. This may be the practice of scholarship itself, as we retreat into the caves of archives and libraries, and into the virtuality of our own heads and computers to engage in the solitary plenitude of writing and reading. This may also be the challenge of recognizing ourselves, as intellectuals, in a world of economies in which our work, along with art, comes to be evaluated more through its immediate market fungibility than through its internal coherence and longevity. In this world, we enter the *ghurba* of the literary, perhaps even of the literate. Unable to retreat into a cave, we must learn to function as refugees, in which all places are equally home because all places are equally exile. It is precisely this estrangement pregnant with the power to persist and to resist that gives us the will to harbor the real-life, non-metaphorical refugee as we would harbor ourselves. This power comes by letting go of the idol, of the image, of the method, of the discipline, even of the object itself, not destructively or dispassionately, but with equanimity. The ensuing will to treasure content above form may become the greatest protection of all.

7.4 The Ambivalent Image

In poetry, the image often functions between dream and reality. Whereas art history considers only the physical image as real, poetry reflects an understanding of the dream world as a real space of divine mediation. Oneiric and physical images often function interchangeably. Working in the complementary genres of romantic and religious poetry, Nizami and Rumi offer complex meditations on the potentially attractive, blinding, and apotropaic functions of disappearing and dream images.

7.4a Nizami's *Shirin and Khosrau*

An artistic theme wending through Nizami's *Shirin and Khosrau* depends on the image's facile transition between the dream and physical worlds. Elaborating the historical mythology of seventh-century Sasanian rulers, the story begins with a celebration of the royal birth and physical and intellectual education invested in Khosrau Parvez, son of the just King Hormizd. The young man squanders this birthright by allowing the property of the poor to be trampled by his careless hunting companions. He is punished, then pardoned. He dreams of his grandfather Anoushirwan,

who foresees Khosrau's wife Shirin (Sweet), her horse, Shabdiz (Midnight), and the court musician Barbad, a figure based on the seventh-century Sasanian Shah Khosrau's court musician Pahlbad. The day after Khosrau dreams of his grandfather, his boon companion Shapur tells him of the mighty Queen Mahin Banu of Armenia and her niece, the incomparable Shirin, and her steadfast steed Shabdiz. The men hatch a plot to attract Shirin through Shapur's artistry, praised for its realism: "O emperor! When I color the drawing of my pen, Mani wishes to destroy his paintings in envy! The head of the figure I paint moves; the wings of the bird, fly!"⁶⁵ Shapur boasts by associating his skill with Mani and Jesus. He promises to fetch Shirin as fast as if he had the legs of wild donkeys and the wings of a bird – an image reminiscent of the flying equine form of Buraq that associates the beloved with the place of worship. Not content with the force of his art or his speed, he promises to extract her with power and magic, like fire from iron and a jewel from stone – as in alchemy. Both metaphors for love, worship and alchemy frame the romance within familiar Sufi tropes.

Shapur speeds away. En route, he discovers a cave hidden under a hermitage with a giant statue of a horse. The description suggests a fictionalized rendition of the monumental fourth-century Sasanian carvings at the Taq-e Bistan, which depict the coronation of Khosrau II above the carving of him on his horse. [Figure 9] Nizami uses the site to attribute mythical powers to Shabdiz as the offspring of a mare who climbed through a small hole in the rock and rubbed herself against the stone horse in order to gain heavenly speed. The historical references temper an Islamized consideration of the function of images through an extra-Islamic context where wine flows and images proliferate. The poetic interface provides examples of how images function in the world, and the potential dangers of such engagements.

Shapur discovers Shirin idyllically summering with her handmaidens. He paints Khosrau's portrait and hides it in a tree. As the party naps after drinking wine, Shirin spots the portrait and has her maidens fetch it. [Plate 11] She can neither look away nor allow herself to put it to her breast. The maidens remove it, convincing her that demons placed it in the forest. Each day for three days, Shapur paints and hides it anew. Each time Shirin falls increasingly in love, such that "the bird of her soul began to flutter from excitement, so that she could no longer speak."⁶⁶ Thus Shapur's promise, that a bird he drew would take wing, becomes a metaphor not for the visual

⁶⁵ Nizami, 1980: 30. ⁶⁶ Nizami, 1980: 38.



Figure 9 Antonin Sevruguin, “Taq-e Bustan, Sasanian Rock Reliefs, Large Vault with Relief of Khusro II,” photographic print, 1880s–1930. Myron Bement Smith Collection: Antoin Sevruguin Photographs, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC: Gift of Katherine Dennis Smith, 1973–1985, FSA A.4 2.I2.GN.39.11

verisimilitude of the image (like the birds of Zeuxis), but of the effect of the Real that he conveys through the image into the soul of the recipient, indicated by her fluttering heart. Yet she misapprehends this inward mimesis as outward: upon viewing the image for the third time, she

exclaims, “I have fallen so in love with this picture that one would take me for an idolater!” Rooted in *Hadith*, however, Shapur’s humble answer enables her enjoyment of the image: “Each picture created by an artist can only give a sign, for it remains without life. I have only been taught the art of signs, but the clothing of the soul can only be woven otherwise!”⁶⁷ Even a lover of images, he seems to say, does not risk *shirk*.

In Persian, the word for ‘sign’ (*nishan*) is the same as that for ‘target’, and thus also for ‘engaged,’ and with these words Shirin sets off like an arrow, riding her trusty steed Shabdiz, which no other horses can match. At dusk, she stops at a lake to bathe. Too impatient to wait at home, Khosrau has set out northward to meet her. The image of him spying the unclothed princess bathing became one of the most frequently illustrated scenes in the repertoire of Islamic manuscript painting. [Plate 12] The popularity of Nizami’s *Khamasa*, including this poem, ensured that numerous similar images were made, both for this work and for later retellings, most famously that by Amir Khosrau, who adopted the protagonist’s name as his sobriquet. The image offers titillation. Like Khosrau, the viewer gets to secretly witness Shirin bathing. In turning the page, we emulate his chaste turning away. Far from causing worship or idolatry, the image forces the viewer to move past simple physical lust. This visual effect corresponds to the function of the gaze in the poem. When Khosrau encounters the naked princess bathing, he recognizes her beauty but looks away respectfully. He looks inwardly to his intended Shirin, whom his eyes do not recognize in the water. Likewise, she dresses, thinking only of her prince. Like Shapur’s portraits, his dream serves as a signal diverting attention. Rather than icons attracting devotion, both the dream and the painted image serve as transformative yet ephemeral signals.

Comparison of this gaze with that in the Greek myth of Artemis and Actaeon elucidates disparate associations between looking, sexuality, and danger. While hunting, the mortal Actaeon accidentally sees Artemis, goddess of the hunt, bathing. In a fury, she threatens to silence him by turning him into a stag. When he protests and is transformed, his own dogs attack him. While the narrative hinge of both stories – the revelation of the divine (goddess/beloved) to mortal eyes – is similar, the consequences diverge. In the Greek myth, having been acknowledged, transgressive sight requires the punishment of silence or death. If the primary taboo is the unbidden revelation of the divine, then the second is its narrative

⁶⁷ Nizami, 1980: 47–48; Weis, 2009: 76.

propagation to unworthy mortals. In contrast, the mental images created by dream and hidden portraits preceding the transgression protect both Shirin and Khosrau – each reciprocally lover and beloved – from recognizing the divinity of each in the other. The transgressive climax transforms into a generative event enabling the rest of the story. Rather than the functions of recognition and identification enabled through political portraits, as in the narratives of Alexander, here the image apotropically protects both protagonists from sin.

In contrast, the second romance in the story, Farhad's passion for Shirin, punishes the lover for his excess devotion. In the story, having arrived at each other's palaces after the lake episode, Shirin and Khosrau eventually enjoy a pleasant courtship playing polo and drinking wine in the gardens near Mahin Banu's palace. [Plate 13] However, the sudden death of both Mahin Banu and Hormizd force the couple to take adult responsibilities. Khosrau marries Princess Meryem of Constantinople to form an alliance and redeem his kingdom from a usurper. Although Shirin rejects his offer to be his mistress, she installs herself nearby, at a palace she had constructed during her first visit. But the jealousy of Khosrau's female companions had led her to build it in a dreadful location. She complains to Shapur, who brings Farhad, a fellow artist with whom he studied in China, to serve her. Upon seeing Shirin, Farhad falls desperately in love. His subsequent actions materialize this passion.

He immediately sets to hewing the stone hills above the palace to build a conduit for the milk of mountain goats to flow to her. Jealous rather than just, Khosrau visits him and demands that he carve a road through the mountain. Not only does Farhad prove his devotion to Shirin by fulfilling the task, he also carves figures into the mountain: a relief carving of Shirin compared to the *Artang* of Mani, and one of Khosrau on horseback. When Shirin visits to see his work and Shabdiz slips, Farhad literalizes the strength of his devotion by carrying horse and rider back down to her palace. Khosrau becomes so jealous that he goes to the mountain to tell Farhad that Shirin has died, and Farhad jumps off the mountain to join her.

Unlike the nearly uniform iconography depicting Khosrau spying Shirin bathing, paintings of Shirin's visits to Farhad depict him variously offering her milk, shouldering her on her horse, or simply talking with her over the cut channel. Some depict the carvings of Bisutun, transforming antique sculptures inscribed in the landscape into visualized mythologies. Many include the depiction of Farhad's tools, suggesting a metaphor for poetic tools channeling love from physical passion into art. At least one



Figure 10 Anonymous, *Shirin Visits the Sculptor Farhad at Work*, from a *Khosrau wa Shirin* by Nizami of Ganj, c.1400. Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC: Purchase – Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1931.35

illustration reflects the poetic reference to the Taq-e Bustan. [Figure 10] As with Shapur's drawings, the artistry presumed sinful in modern understandings of Islamic cultural norms is treated as beneficial and noble.

Although the poem purportedly is about the relationship between Khosrau and Shirin as foretold in the initiating dream, the tragic love of Farhad for Shirin forms its central romance. Uninterrupted by worldly exigencies such as governance and alliance, Farhad devotes himself to love. In contrast, even when Meryem dies and Khosrau finds himself free to remarry, he dallies with other women, earning Shirin's wrath before they eventually unite, rule, and die together. In contrast, art sublimates Farhad's all-consuming, ill-fated, unconsummated love. The channels that he carves through the mountains become the conduit for his passion, which flows as sustaining milk to the palace of Shirin. Yet Farhad is an idolater – not because of the images that he creates, but because of his excessive devotion to the beloved. His willingness to sacrifice everything for that love, to destroy his Kaaba, makes him both a sinner and the mythical paradigm of lovers, the ideal not only of romance, but of sacral devotion.

7.4b The Three Princes and the Fortress of Form

Nizami's advocacy of the image as an apotropaic transformer of idolatry into love finds a counterpart in the culminating narrative of Jalal al-Din Rumi's *Mathnawi*. The story emerges from a folktale (improbably combining elements of Sleeping Beauty and the Trojan horse) related by Rumi's beloved mentor, Shams of Tabriz (1185–1248).

They came to a fortress; the story is well known. They saw the picture of the daughter of the Shah of China on the wall and fell in love with her. They went to the Shah to ask for her hand. He told his servants to show them the moat full of severed heads, heads of those who'd asked for his daughter's hand without producing the required token. The eldest claimed he would produce the token, but failed and was killed. The second prince died the same way. The third prince came forward, accepted the conditions, and resolved to succeed.

The princess's nurse felt sorry for him and proposed he construct a golden cow; he could hide inside it and thus enter the princess's quarters. He did this, spent nights of love with the princess ("combing her hair"), and obtained her veil, the required token.⁶⁸

Rumi undermines the romantic quest by distancing the figure of the princess. By abstracting the image as 'form' to which mortals willingly sacrifice themselves, he develops a parable about the human relationship with materiality and representation.

⁶⁸ Holbrook, 1994: 43.

In his rendition, three princes set forth with their father's blessing to discover the far corners of their future kingdom. The king promises them protection, warning them to keep away from the fortress, destroyer of self-restraint and robber of consciousness. Naturally, they disobey.

They arrive at the fortress of images, which resembles a body with external and internal senses.

Into the beautiful fortress adorned with pictures,
five gates to the sea and five to the land –

Five of those, like the senses, facing towards color and perfume;
five of them, like the interior senses, seeking the mystery.⁶⁹

The space, likened to wine, makes the young men, likened to idolaters, restless. Although the similes underscore the fortress as a place of sin, it also serves as a necessary passage for the education of the soul.

By those thousands of pictures and designs and decorations
they were made mightily restless to and fro.

Do not be intoxicated with these cups, which are forms,
lest you become a carver of idols and an idolater.⁷⁰

The intoxication, and not form itself, renders the princes idolaters. In the palace of images, like a gallery or museum, their desire intoxicates them, not the images. Although form enables the passage of meaning much as the cup enables the drinking of wine, the soul is expected to perceive beyond materiality to apprehend what matter conveys.

Abandon the cups, namely, the forms: do not tarry!
There is wine in the cup, but it is not from the cup.⁷¹

Like ibn Arabi's observation of glass appearing green from the liquid inside, the cup is not only a carrier for the wine, but the wine itself is a carrier of intoxication (see [Chapter 5.3](#)). Yet intoxication comes not through drinking the wine, but through a divine gift which makes the true form of the intoxication sensible.

Open your mouth wide to the Giver of the wine:
when the wine comes, the cup will not be lacking.⁷²

⁶⁹ Rumi, 1934: 462 (3703–3706). ⁷⁰ Rumi, 1934: 462 (3707). ⁷¹ Rumi, 1934: 462 (3708).

⁷² Rumi, 1934: 462 (3709).

The restlessness of the young men resembles that of the young Bahram Gur, the hero of Nizami's *Seven Icons* (*Haft Paykar*), who finds a secret chamber in his palace depicting his seven future brides:

A chamber like a treasure store,
Which turned to jewelers all who saw.
The pictures on its walls excelled
A hundred Chinese temples; all
That finest art and skill could form
Of pictures, did its walls adorn.
Seven beauteous images there hung,
Each one connected with a realm ...
One hand had drawn these seven forms,
By one cord in a circle hung,
Each, with a thousand beauties bright,
kindled the gem of vision's light.
An image in the midst therewith –
The others rind, this one the pith –
A belt of pearls circled his waist
And musky down his moon-like face ...
And over his head, in skillful script,
The name of 'Bahram Gur' was writ:
"Such is the seven stars' decree,
that such a conqueror come to be.
Seven princesses from seven realms
Shall he embrace, like single pearls ..."
Sometimes on a drunken whim, the king
Approached that chamber, key in hand,
And, entering into Paradise,
On those angelic forms would gaze;
And like one who, near water, thirsts,
would sleep, still moved by his desire.
Abroad, he but the hunt pursued;
At home, that room his sorrow soothed.⁷³

Like Khosrau, Bahram Gur learns of his future betrothal through prognosticating images. The palace seduces him like Shirin beholding Khosrau's portrait. Yet it also sedatively shields him from excessive passion like that of Farhad.

Depicted in a manuscript dedicated to the Timurid sultan Iskandar (r.1384–1415), the scene reflects layers of transmedial representation

⁷³ Nizami, 1995: 51–53.

between worldly love and divine intention. [Plate 14] Each of the future brides represents a color, a planet, and an element associated with the planet. The painting shows each of the seated figures as a woman. Patterns and colors beneath each of them suggest a correspondence between the visual mimetic representation of the form and the ideal representation enabled through geometry.

Although partly metaphorical, such descriptions also represented real palaces where poetry was commissioned and enjoyed. For example, an ode by the poet Abu al-Qasim Hasan Unsuri (961–1039) about the palace of a Ghaznavid vizier describes within it a picture gallery, the brilliant cupola of which is like the cup of Kay Khosrau, where the “twelve [houses of the zodiac] and the seven [planets] travel and rotate,” a common means of depicting the dome of heaven within palace architecture. Unlike in the palace of Bahram Gur, however, the room is full of pictures, as in the Fortress of Form:

Like idol-temples, its arches are filled with pictures
 Blooming like roses, flawless as the hearts of the pious.
 The brilliance of their moonlike faces ever shows forth roses; the curls of their black
 locks ever scatter pitch ...
 [The paintings] are not embroidered fabrics, yet all (wear) embroidered
 robes;
 [They are] not a gold mine, but all of the purest gold,
 Not a silver mine, but all of silver-work ...
 Therein is limned – with auspicious portent and felicitous star –
 The lord, feasting and fighting, upon the throne, and in the hunt.
 Hunting for lofty fortune; fighting the rage of foes;
 Demonstrating everlasting affluence at the feast.⁷⁴

Although not specified as portraits, the description of moonlike faces wearing gold and silver embroidered garments suggests a picture gallery in which images of women surround that of a king. On an allegorical level, the room suggests a passage from the realm of materiality and beauty toward one of transcendence. For though the arches of the room are filled with pictures like temples dedicated to idols, these pictures are also like the hearts of the pious whose faces radiate like the moon and whose hair radiates darkness. This notion of radiating black light is a common poetic trope for divine light, the brightness of which darkens human eyes.⁷⁵ Thus even a celebration of material wealth is intertwined

⁷⁴ Meisami, 2001: 27. ⁷⁵ Galip, 2005: xix.

with metaphysical qualities, enabling everlasting affluence – presumably in the hereafter.

Rumi's palace, then, conveys not simply a palace, but a series of intertextual allusions defining palaces through images and intoxication. Having established these metaphors, the narrative pauses for an interpretive interlude, offering a critique of form in favor of the ideal made possible by formlessness.

Form is brought into existence by the Formless,
just as smoke is produced by a fire.

The least blemish in the qualities of that which is endowed with form becomes
annoying when you regard it continually;

Formlessness throws you into absolute bewilderment:
from non-instrumentality a hundred kinds of instruments are born.⁷⁶

Moving beyond the Platonic distinction between the ideal–Real and our physical reality as its shadow, the poem postulates a world in which thoughts are the reality from which actions and creations emerge in the world. The only reality is that of thought, reaffirming human existence as the emanation of divine thought. Yet the princes cannot read this information: they must make their way through the fortress to discover it. Inside, they see a portrait that, although not the most beautiful they have seen, plunges them into a deep sea:

Because opium came to them in this cup:
the cups are visible, but the opium is unseen.

The fortress, the destroyer of reason, wrought its work:
it cast them, all three, into the pit of tribulation.

Without a bow the arrow-like glances pierce the heart –
mercy, mercy, O merciless one!

A stone image consumed the generations
and kindled a fire in their religion and their hearts.⁷⁷

Romantic love and opiate intoxication offer metaphors for readers to comprehend loss of self in the ecstatic experience of the divine.

The description of such a gallery in the Fortress of Form (*Kal'e-yi Zat-us-Suver*) in Rumi's poem suggests that the pictures represent not only their manifest content, but also immateriality.⁷⁸ The princes need a guide in order to remedy their transgression against their father brought on by

⁷⁶ Rumi, 1934: 462 (3012–3014). ⁷⁷ Rumi, 1934: 465 (3762–3766). ⁷⁸ Holbrook, 1994: 36.

their lack of insight. So they seek out a shaykh “endowed with insight ... Not by way of the ear, but by inspiration from Reason.”⁷⁹ Here, Reason indicates not our modern rationalism based on senses and logic, but on internal knowledge. He explains the portrait with which they have fallen in love:

He said, “This is the portrait of an object of envy to the Pleiades:
this is the picture of the Princess of China.

She is hidden like the spirit and like the embryo:
she is in a secret bower and palace.

Neither man nor woman is admitted to her:
the King has concealed her on account of her fascinations.

The King has a jealousy for her name,
so that not even a bird flies above her roof.”⁸⁰

Shaykh Ankaravi interprets the princes as intellect, spirit, and heart. The Chinese princess is

the virgin of meaning and veiled female of spirit who is the spiritual child of the Shah of truth’s China in which divine science consists. And the imagining and forming of that virgin of meaning and divine science is this fortress of form – which is the world – is the image and form, written on paper or veiled from view, of the words of the Prophet.⁸¹

The poem thus suggests a gendered ontology of the divine. God, the Shah of truth, is accessed through his daughter, the female spirit and virgin of meaning. Unlike the Christian rendition of God, who reveals his son only to conceal him, this father conceals his daughter as though in a womb, implying a potential for birth. She is the creator of forms – one of the names of God – and thus, like Christ, also integral to the singular divinity. The bird, reminiscent of that brought to life by Christ in the Quran, underscores the transreligious implications of the passage.

Framing two other stories, the narrative of the three princes returns to the adventure incited by the shaykh’s revelation. The shaykh chides them for having preached fortitude to others enduring hardship but failing and having “gone under the *chador* like cowardly women.”⁸² After another parable, the poem describes how the brothers set out to become true witnesses by traveling to China. This leads to another story, which echoes

⁷⁹ Rumi, 1934: 466 (3787–3788). ⁸⁰ Rumi, 1934: 467 (3789–3793). ⁸¹ Holbrook, 1994: 45.

⁸² Rumi, 1934: 473 (3901).

Attar's incorporation of the story of Joseph and Zuleikha, a romance similarly set in a palace of images (see [Chapter 8](#)), with that of *The Language of the Birds*, where the birds' weaknesses cause their failures.

After this interlude, the frame story continues as the eldest prince decides to challenge fate and present himself directly to the king.

The eldest said, "O my brother,
from waiting this soul of mine is on the verge.

I have become reckless, I can endure no more:
this endurance has set me on fire.

My strength is exhausted by this fortitude:
my plight is a warning to lovers.

I am weary of my life in separation:
it is hypocrisy to be alive in separation.⁸³

...

My spirit has boasted that it is a water-bird:
how should it lament the flood of tribulation?

What cares the duck for shipwreck?
Her feet in the water are ship enough.⁸⁴

...

Though you behead me a hundred times,
I am like a candle: I will burn brightly.

Though the stack catches fire in front and behind,
the stack of that Moon is enough for travelers in the night."⁸⁵

Yet his presumption that union is possible without 'intellect' (divine guidance or inspiration) reflects his hubris. His brothers warn him, but to no avail. After another narrative interlude, we learn of his fate before the king.

The prince in the presence of the King was bewildered by this:
he beheld the Seven Heavens in a handful of clay.

Nowise was it possible to open his lips in discussion,
but never for a moment did soul cease to converse with soul.

It came into his mind that It was exceedingly mysterious –

⁸³ Rumi, 1934: 479 (4054–4057). ⁸⁴ Rumi, 1934: 482 (4062–4063).

⁸⁵ Rumi, 1934: 483 (4067–4068).

“all this is reality: whence, then, comes the form?”

A form that frees you from form,
a sleeper that awakens everyone who is asleep.

...

In short, the King cherished him fondly,
and in that Sun he was melting away like the moon.

The melting away of lovers is growth:
like the moon, he has a fresh face while he is melting away.⁸⁶

Although the narrative underscores his death, it also describes the prince's dissolution in the divine, describing the renewed and perpetual death of divine ecstasy.

He said, “The King beheads every one once,
I am sacrificed anew by the King at every instant.

I am poor in gold, but rich in heads:
my head has a hundred heads to take its place.”⁸⁷

After another narrative interlude, the frame story returns as the second brother attends the funeral of the eldest alone, as the youngest brother is ill.

The King espied him, he said with a purpose,
“Who is this? – for he is of that sea, and he too is a fish.”

Then the announcer said, “He is a son of the same father:
this brother is younger than that brother.”

The King greeted him affectionately, saying, “You are a keepsake”;
and by this enquiry made him too his prey.

In consequence of the kindness shown by the King,
that wretched man, roasted, found in his body a soul other than the soul.

He felt within his heart a sublime emotion
which the Sufi does not experience during a hundred *chilas*.⁸⁸

Court-yard and wall and mountain woven of stone
seemed to split open before him like a laughing pomegranate.

One by one, the atoms were momentarily opening their doors to him, like tents, in a
hundred diverse ways.

⁸⁶ Rumi, 1934: 512 (4589–4592, 4596–4597). ⁸⁷ Rumi, 1934: 512 (4602–4603).

⁸⁸ *Chila* is Sufi training in material renunciation.

The door would become now the window, now the sunbeams;
the earth would become now the wheat, now the bushel.

In eyes the heavens are very old and threadbare;
in his eye it was a new creation at every moment.

When the beautiful spirit is delivered from the body,
no doubt an eye like this will be conferred upon it by destiny.

A hundred thousand mysteries were revealed to him:
he beheld that which the eyes of the initiated behold.

The second prince thus experiences the manifold manifestations of the divine in the ordinary material world, moving from the stage of learning about the divine to engaging with it through inner sensation.

He opened eye on the form
of that which he had read in books.

From the dust of the mighty King's horse
he obtained a precious eye salve for his eyesight.

In such a garden of flowers he was trailing his skirt,
while every part of him was crying, "Is there any more?"

The flowers that grow from plants are a moment;
the flowers that grow from Reason are fresh.

The flowers that bloom from earth become faded;
the flowers that bloom from the heart – oh, what a joy!

Know that the delightful sciences known to us
are two or three bunches of flowers from that Garden.

We are devoted to these two or three bunches of flowers
because we have shut the Garden-door on ourselves.⁸⁹

Unlike the first son, whose pure love saved him from pride and enabled his undiminished recognition of the blessings of the divine, the second son becomes prideful:

Pangs of jealousy arose in the King;
the reflection of the King's pangs entered into him.

The bird of his felicity fluttered violently in reproaching him
and tore the veil of him who had sought seclusion.

⁸⁹ Rumi, 1934: 514 (4635–4652).

...

His soul that was like a peacock in the garden of delight
became like an owl in the wilderness of unreality.

Like Adam, he was left far away from Paradise,
driving an ox on the earth for the purpose of sowing.

In pain from fear of losing his faith again, he begs the king to kill him, and – after several parables considering suffering that befalls the just – the king awakens from his state of self-effacement to discover that his arrow has found its mark in the boy's throat. The king, the boy's slayer, mourns for him as he is also his next of kin. Nonetheless, he goes unscathed to the beloved.

Although he laid hold of the Emperor's saddle-strap,
in the end he was admitted by the eye whose glances kill.

And the third was the laziest of the three:
he won completely – the form as well as the reality.

The poem paradoxically suggests that the best relationship with form or image is not that of seduction or prohibition, but that of neutrality: utter laziness that enables God to work on behalf of creation. In the next story, about a king who leaves his kingdom to the laziest of his three sons:

The gnostics are the laziest folk in the two worlds,
because they get their harvest without ploughing.

They have made laziness their prop
since God is working for them.

The vulgar do not see God's working
and never rest from toil at morn or eve.⁹⁰

The fortress emerges as the many-layered world of images which is simultaneously necessary and a distraction from the purpose and yearning of life: union with God. This image of the lazy inheriting the world contrasts the valorization of labor embodied in the so-called work ethic, often identified with the same Protestant Christianity underlying the secularization of art history. In contrast to capitalism, where labor to create and circulate goods comes to signify not just worldly success but moral worth, this emphasis on laziness valorizes disinterested interaction the world, celebrating the fruits of God's labor.

⁹⁰ Rumi, 1934: 522 (4778–4779, 4785–4786, 4875–4876, 4887–4888).

In the highly intertextual eighteenth-century romance *Beauty and Love*, the Ottoman poet Shaykh Galip (1757–1799), leader of the dervish lodge devoted to Rumi, further explicates the tropes of the Fortress of Form and the Chinese princess. Creatively honoring existing tropes by rewriting them, he establishes an ecumenism similar to that in the poem quoted as epigraph in this book, likening the fortress to a Hindu temple, to the stones that pre-Islamic Arab tribes used for worshipping the goddess Lat, and to a church nave. He thus strongly affiliates the image with the idol and the icon of non-Islamic religions. He then likens the fortress to the palace built by Zuleikha, Farhad's carved images of Shirin, and paintings by the famed artists Mani and Bihzad. Shaykh Galip thus indicates the affiliation between the worship of the believer and the icon/idol, the rapture of the lover for his beloved, and the illustration of these as paintings. Nonetheless:

The forms there from matter were disengaged
Presenting themselves uniquely half faced.

His images are simultaneously material and immaterial, somewhere between dream and image, suspended in *barzakh*. In contrast to Rumi's tale, where the artist of the princess's portrait is ambiguous, in Shaykh Galip's rendition she is the artist.

The one who had painted all those portraits
Was none but that jeering Chinese princess.

Fantastic like lovers' most cherished dreams
A trick never in this world to be seen.⁹¹

Although as creator of all palatial raiment, the princess could be a metaphor for the divine Creator, she is also "jeering," and thus a mere simulacrum of the (divine) Beauty which Love, trapped in the Fortress of Forms, seeks. He burns down the fortress, ignoring the magical treasure left in its ashes, within which lay the representation of the entire world. Wasting away with despair, he is saved by Poetry, who leads him to the Land of the Heart, which he had never really left. However, his journey has purified his soul, enabling him to discover that he is already one with Beauty: theophany lies in his awareness that their union always already lies within. Form provides a necessary passage to "the land of non-existent things" where only Dazzle can lead him past the "curtains of union" with the divine.⁹²

⁹¹ Galip, 2005: 179. ⁹² Galip, 2005: 185.

The Fortress of Form, then, is the robber of consciousness. We are trapped within the material world and an image-based, symbolic imagination through which to apprehend it. The image is unavoidable. Necessary, it cannot be prohibited. Yet the materiality in which we live, itself an image of the real, is also a trap, as is the image of that materiality. The concern expressed in this tangle of stories, from dream images and apocryphal silk portraits of the prophets to galleries in palaces, has nothing to do with image prohibition. Rather, these images point to the importance of recognizing the image as a trap. Idolatry becomes not the worship of idols as pagan gods embodied in matter, but the act of imbuing anything – images, but also objects, lovers, interpretations, authorities, and even ourselves – with the status of the absolute, reserved for the divine.

This lack of interest in the image as a representational medium has proven misleading to Western commentators looking for art-historical guideposts in Islamic texts. Examining *Canon of Forms* (*Qanun al-Suvar*, 1597) by the portrait painter and head of the royal library under the Safavid Shah Abbas I (r. 1587–1629) in Qazvin, Sadiqi Beg Afshar (1533–1610), Yves Porter expects a pragmatic guide for artists and expresses disappointment with the relative absence of specific information on how to paint or the establishment of a canon. This reflects not a lack, but a different understanding, of the image: the need for a canon emerges in our epistemic framework, not in theirs. While the text begins with the intention, “Let me be the one who looks for meaning on the face of painting,” the author ultimately alters his purpose:

I have searched for so long in the path of form
That I have changed my way from the form to the meaning.

Thus he praises his master not for representational skill, but for internal vision: “He could see beyond the rules of sight ... / with a single hair he painted both worlds.”⁹³ As in the poetry of Rumi and Galip, such statements suggest a purpose and ontology of art, relationships between object and artist, artist and artwork, and artwork and viewer, invisible to the modern art-historical paradigm.

The working title of this book was *Fortress of Form, Robber of Consciousness* because this serves as an apt metaphor for how our desire to rationalize often robs our ability to understand. Art history is a fortress of form, the museum its trap. It robs our consciousness by offering objects as substitutes for concepts. Facts become frames limiting meaning. Such

⁹³ Porter, 2000: 112.

disciplinarity denies the facility to hear images between dreams and reality, between experience and projection, between faith and science: the space of life. Released from this fortress, form becomes a vehicle that breathes its world into our consciousness. Rather than obeying the modernizing impulse that art must become segregated from the world as a sign of time, place and identity, art returns to its function as a passage through which to process the plenitude of experience. Does this obviate the museum, and perhaps art history as well? I hope not. We thrive through beauty and materiality. Yet to preserve form without preserving content causes an internal decay that collapses on itself, ultimately destroying both. The trick would be neither annihilation nor adulation, and not a Kantian disinterest modeled through empiricism, but instead a lazy love allowing reason's interplay with intuition.

Acquaintances often express surprise at my combined Jewish and Muslim background. This reflects a common assumption of opposition between Judaism and Islam, obliviousness to the historical frequency of intergroup marriage (particularly under Islamic hegemony), and a startling religious identitarianism even in supposedly secular environments. If secularity leads to the claim that we abandon religion while nonetheless cleaving to it as identity, religion becomes a variant of nationalism. Yet if we take secularity as an opportunity to rethink religious boundaries beyond the surfaces of habit and through their histories, religion can become a much more intersectional realm of shared faith, where the sacred matters more than the path.

Not only does Islam trace its heritage to Judaism, the two religions developed in dialogue within contexts of Islamic hegemony from Baghdad to Cordoba. Appearing in both the Talmud and the Quran, the story of the prophet Joseph and the wife of the Egyptian official to whom he is enslaved reflects this intimacy. It is the longest sequential narrative in the Quran. Its importance expanded through tenth- and thirteenth-century popular tales of the prophets, thirteenth-century Quranic commentary, and subsequent Persian poetry. The most famous rendition of the story emerged when Nur al-Din Abu al-Rahman Jami, a leading theologian and Sufi shaykh who worked at the Timurid courts of Herat and Samarkand, elaborated it as an epic poem fashioned after Nizami's romances. The story weds the visual to the sexual as a paradigm for the journey of faith. It points to a discourse of transgression less as sin than as part of the human navigation of divine intention mediated partly, but not exclusively, by the image. In contrast, the development of the same theme in Protestant Christian exegesis and European painting shifts away from the theme of idolatry toward a prudish yet prurient iconography of feminine vice and masculine virtue.

This chapter examines the convergences and divergences of the story's interpretations through the arts in the Eastern and Western Abrahamic traditions. The first section first looks to the elaboration of the story in a collaborative Judeo-Islamic hermeneutical framework. The second section

examines the story's elaboration in Persian poetry and painting. The third section discusses the increased emphasis on the story in Lutheran theology and its subsequent depiction in European painting. Whereas in the Islamic context, painting partook in textual and poetic analytic discourses in Europe, painting developed a more independent interpretive role. The comparison reflects how art-historical methods such as iconographic analysis and the sociopolitical contextualization of painting benefit from concerted intermedial and intertextual analysis.

8.1 Between Midrashic and Quranic Commentaries: Islam and Judaism in Dialogue

The Quran refers to the story of Joseph as “the most beautiful of stories.” It is not accidental, then, that Jami was able to develop his sophisticated yet popular rendition from a plethora of sources. As a theologian, he would have known Quranic commentaries (*tafsir*) including those by Jafar al-Tabari, the Shi’ite shaykh Abu Jafar al-Tusi (995–1067), Nasir al-Din al-Baidawi, and Isma’il ibn Kathir (1300–1373); and popular compilations of tales of the prophets (*qisas al-‘anbiya’*) such as those by al-Thalabi (d. 1036) and Muhammad al-Kisa’i (twelfth century). He may have read an anonymous thirteenth–fourteenth-century Arabic poem about Joseph, and would no doubt have read Suhrawardi’s discussion in his treatise “On the Reality of Love or the Solace of Lovers,” as well as the short poetic rendition in the *Bustan* of Sa’di of Shiraz (1210–1292). Jami’s poem also mentions details found in Jewish commentary, possibly reflecting shared sources and/or familiarity with the commentary of al-Biq’a’i (1407–1480), who interpolated the Quranic rendition with biblical quotations in his Quranic commentary, begun in 1456.¹ In Jami’s poetry, however, Joseph’s dreams, central to biblical interpretations, recede. Romantic and visual themes expand. This emphasis may reflect discussions concerning the image at the Timurid court in Herat, where royal patronage enabled theologians and scholars to work concurrently with an atelier for book arts. Integrating elite theological discourse into the popular genre of a romance, Jami’s poetic expansion of the story fostered widespread circulation of basic ideas about the roles of the image and the dream, human and material beauty, and aesthetic and sexual pleasure.

¹ Saleh, 2007. Muslim commentators readily cited the Bible as an earlier, weaker rendition of the authoritative Quranic word of God.

A sequence of deceptions fuels the narrative. When he is young, Joseph's paternal aunt Leah, besotted by his beauty, falsely claims that he stole her father Isaac's belt. The accusation enables her to demand his perpetual companionship.² Upon her death, he joins his family in the house of his father, Jacob. His brothers envy his favored status, take him on an outing, throw him down a well, and tell Jacob that a wild animal has killed him. Rescued, sold as a slave, and purchased by an unnamed high official of the Egyptian Pharaoh, Joseph becomes the object of his master's wife's desires.³ He damages his garment while escaping her attempt at seduction.⁴ She tries to protect herself by claiming that he tried to rape her. In the Bible, he goes to prison. In the Quran, he is exonerated through the intervention of a witness from her family, who suggests that a frontal rip reflects his guilt, a posterior rip, hers. Her husband declares this event an example of the guile of women.⁵ The women of the town gossip that the wife tried to seduce her slave. The wife hosts a banquet in which all her friends realize the power of his unearthly beauty. They demand his favors. Seeking escape, he prays to go to prison despite his innocence. In Genesis, the gathering takes place before the seduction, and includes a detail absent from the Quran, yet central to later poetry: that the guests were given citrons.⁶ The

² at-Ta'labi, 2002: 149.

³ Various traditions name the official differently. In Genesis, he is Potiphar, captain of the guard, but Ginsberg indicates that in earlier commentaries he is the chief cook (Ginzberg, 1946: V, 327, n. 111). The Bereshit Rabbah provides an etymology for the name 'Potiphar' linking him with idolatry: "he fattened bullocks (the word 'fatten' contains the letters PT, and the word bullocks, PR, hence the name of Potiphar contains the letters that stand for 'fatten bullocks' for idolatry). He was called Potiphar, because he exposed himself before idols." He was "physically castrated, which teaches that Potiphar bought Joseph only for sexual purposes, so the Holy One, blessed be he, physically castrated him." This implication of his homosexual desire for Joseph emerges again through later descriptions of his pleasure in Joseph's company and growing dependence on his servant. Many later Christian exegetes, following in the tradition of Jerome, interpreted this to mean that Potiphar was one of Pharaoh's eunuchs.

In the Quran he has no name or rank but is simply an Egyptian.

The wife has no name in Genesis or the Quran. Ginzberg cites the earliest commentaries as mentioning her as Pentophoe. Al-Thalabi cites her as Ra'il, al-Kisa'i, as Zuleikha, and Baidawi as Ra'il or Zuleikha. In Sa'di, Jami, and all later references, her name is Zuleikha. A thirteenth/fourteenth-century anonymous Arabic poem on the theme, probably from Egypt, also uses the name Zuleikha. Ginzberg indicates that the name Zuleikha entered Jewish traditions in sixteenth-century commentaries (Ginzberg, 1946: V, 327, n. 111, 113; Neusner, 1985: 222; Mattox, 2003: 235; Ebied and Young, 1975).

⁴ In most renditions, his garment rips. In Genesis, he leaves his garment in her hand.

⁵ The witness is not referenced in Genesis. In the Quran, the identity of the witness as coming from her family underscores deception against familial loyalties. Ginzberg identifies the witness as her child, but his Midrashic citation is not clear (Ginzberg, 1946: 57). Both al-Thalabi and al-Kisa'i say it was either her cousin or a baby.

⁶ Kugel, 1990: 29.

wife, still in love, visits him in prison. As in the Bible, in prison he prophetically interprets the dreams of two fellow convicts. When one is released, he asks that he remind their master of his fate. The released prisoner forgets him until the king needs dream interpretation. Joseph interprets the dream correctly and thereby saves Egypt from famine. His previous suffering is undone: he comes to power and his brothers bow before him. In the Talmudic narration and commentary, Joseph marries his master's daughter.⁷ In some post-Quranic renditions, the wife repents, eventually marries Joseph, and they have children.

The Quranic story appears abridged in comparison with the Talmudic/biblical one. The dreams of Joseph and his rule over Egypt, central to the Jewish theme of deliverance, are synoptic. The retelling emphasizes the incomprehensibility of the wisdom of God to man: "God always prevails in his purpose, though most people do not realize it" (Q12:2).⁸ The Quranic version focuses more on the seduction than earlier sources, clearly indicating his shared temptation:

The woman in whose house he was living tried to seduce him: she bolted the doors and said, "Come to me," and he replied, "God forbid! My master has been good to me; wrongdoers never prosper." She made for him, and he would have succumbed to her if he had not seen evidence of his Lord – We did this in order to keep evil and indecency away from him, for he was truly one of Our chosen servants. (Q12:23–24)⁹

In contrast, earlier renditions of this story contrast her lust with his purity. The second-century BCE *Testament of Joseph* depicts the wife as consumed by evil lust and frenzy.¹⁰ The first-century BCE *Book of Jubilees* and the first-century CE *Philo* set masculine virtue against feminine vice to juxtapose Hebrew virtue with foreign dissipation. The *Genesis Rabbah* humanizes the sexual desires of the wife, but also compares her behavior to the harlot in Proverbs 7:6–20.¹¹

Despite some sympathetic readings foreshadowing the Quranic text, the *Bereshit/Genesis* that became canonical among Christians emphasizes the theme of vice.

And it came to pass after these things, that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph; and she said: "Lie with me."

⁷ According to one Jewish commentary, one of the reasons that the wife is so besotted with Joseph is her misinterpretation of an astrological prophecy that she would have descendants through Joseph. Ginzberg, 1946: 44.

⁸ Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 144. ⁹ Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 146. ¹⁰ Gur-Klein, 2001.

¹¹ Levinson, 1997: 272.

But he refused, and said unto his master's wife: "Behold, my master, having me, knoweth not what is in the house, and he hath put all that he hath into my hand; he is not greater in this house than I; neither hath he kept back anything from me but thee, because thou art his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against G-d?" And it came to pass, as she spoke to Joseph day by day, that he hearkened not unto her, to lie by her, or to be with her. (Genesis 39:7–10)¹²

Like the Bible, the Quranic story also emphasizes woman's vice as the husband recognizes the wife's false accusation of Joseph and says, "This is another instance of woman's treachery: your treachery is truly great" (Q12:28).¹³ This has often been understood as a Quranic defamation of women.¹⁴ However, the indictment comes not from God, but from the husband, who is not fully reliable: he is a pagan, and may also have homosexual desire for his servant.¹⁵

The Quranic elaboration of the banquet scene, short in Genesis, enables a sympathetic interpretation of the wife, adopted as well in the Midrash *Tanhuma*, compiled in the eighth to ninth centuries.¹⁶

30 Some women of the city said, "The governor's wife is trying to seduce her slave! Love for him consumes her heart! It is clear to us that she has gone astray." 31 When she heard their malicious talk, she prepared a banquet and sent for them, giving each of them a knife. She said to Joseph, "Come out and show yourself to them!" and when the women saw him, they were stunned by his beauty, and cut their hands, exclaiming, "Great God! He cannot be mortal! He must be a precious angel!" 32 She said, "This is the one you blamed me for. I tried to seduce him and he wanted to remain chaste, but if he does not do what I command now, he will be put in prison and degraded." (Q12:30–32)¹⁷

Joseph prays to God to protect him not only from the women, but from his own desire. "My Lord! I would prefer prison to what these women are calling me to do. If you do not protect me from their treachery, I shall yield to them and do wrong" (Q12:33).¹⁸ The household recognizes his innocence and decides to put him in prison. In the biblical account, this imprisonment is the crux of the story, setting the stage for his prophetic dreams. Yet it also points to a central narrative paradox: Joseph is simultaneously pure and lustful, innocent and yet also guilty.

¹² Neusner, 1985: 227. ¹³ Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 147. ¹⁴ Merguerian and Najmabadi, 1997.

¹⁵ Neusner, 1985: 222.

¹⁶ The question of whether the Midrash was informed by the emergence of the Quran is subject to debate.

¹⁷ Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 147. ¹⁸ Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 147.

Quranic commentaries elaborate with a setting and detailed dialogue. Al-Thalabi relates how Joseph's pious reminders of human mortality negates each of the wife's compliments:

According to ibn Waki' – 'Amr b. Muhammad – Asbat – al Suddi (as the Quran says,), "She desired him and he would have desired her." She said, "O Joseph, how beautiful your hair is!" He answered, "It is the first thing that will fall off of my body." She said, "O Joseph, how beautiful your eyes are!" He answered, "They are the first things that will melt into the earth from my body." She said, "O Joseph, how beautiful your face is!" He answered, "The earth will eat it." But she kept after him until she had enticed him.¹⁹

Using a similarly accessible register, al-Kisa'i provides even more extensive dialogue, further humanizing the figures by underscoring the linguistic and cultural difference between them:

"How lovely are your words, and how graceful you are!" she said.

**

Wahb said that Joseph's light shone in his eyes and also glowed beneath his skin, just as a wick shines in a crystal lamp.

"Zuleikha," said Joseph, "were you to see me after my death, you would not recognize me or have seen anything worse than me."

"O Joseph," she said, "I am passionately in love with you. I cannot but try to seduce you!"

"Zuleikha," he said, "having seen the signs of God, would you commit a sin?"

"How beautiful is your language," she replied, "but I do not understand it."

"It is the language of my grandfather Abraham," said Joseph. "Were it not forbidden to polytheists, I would teach it to you. I will speak to you in Qamarite if you wish."

"I prefer the Hauranite tongue," she said, "For that is the language of the people of Egypt."

She went to great pains to tempt him again: she built a beautiful bower, adorned with every sort of embellishment, and called it the House of Joy and Pleasure. She bedecked herself with finery, reclined on her couch and called for Joseph. She seated him on the couch and *shut the doors* (12.23) and pulled the curtains.

¹⁹ at-Ta'labi, 2002: 155.

"Oh Joseph," she said, "I am yours!"

"But where is your husband Potiphar?" asked Joseph.

"I have nothing to do with him," she answered. "You are the only one for me. I am yours!"

"O Zuleikha, I fear this house will be a house of sorrow and a spot of hell."

"O Joseph, I love you with all my heart. Lift up your head and look at me in the fullness of my beauty!"

"Your master has more right to that than I do."

"Come close to me, Joseph!"

"But I fear lest my portion of Paradise be lost."

"I have discreetly veiled my affair from the people, so come close to me!"

"But who will veil me from God, the Lord of the Universe?"

"If you do not do as I wish," she screamed, "I shall kill myself this very instant, and you will be put to death on my account!" And she put her hand on a knife as if to kill herself (but it was just a ruse on her part to trick Joseph). Hastening toward the knife, he snatched it from her hand and threw it aside. Then she threw herself upon him and untied seven of the knots in his trousers, one after the other.²⁰

The apogee of the seduction scene suggests high drama. The Genesis Rabbah offers a longer version than later versions through the repetition of the phrase "Behold my master" and extended dialogic elements between the wife and Joseph. Although it does not comment directly on his desire, the variety of his excuses – to become too polluted to serve as a sacrifice to God; that he will lose his birthright; that he fears his Lord – indicate temptation requiring resistance.

In contrast, the clear Quranic emphasis on the sexual nature of his temptation becomes central to commentaries. Al-Thalabi says:

According to [an *isnad*] ibn Abbas was asked how far Joseph went in following his desires. He said, "He loosened his waistband and sat with her as one who possesses would sit."

According to [another *isnad*], ibn Abbas said, "She lay on her back for him and he sat between her legs removing his clothes."²¹

Al-Baidawi similarly emphasizes Joseph's temptation as necessary for his virtue.

What is meant by Joseph's desiring her is natural propensity and the struggling of carnal feelings, not a rationally chosen purpose. Such feelings do not fall within the

²⁰ al-Kisa'i, 1997: 174–175. ²¹ at-Ta'labi, 2002: 156.

sphere of moral responsibility. But the person who truly deserves praise and the heavenly reward is the one who restrains himself from acting when this sort of impulse arises or is about to arise.²²

In contrast, the Genesis Rabbah dramatizes the scene not through sexuality but through idolatry.

She forced him from room to room and from chamber to chamber, until she got him into her bed. There was an idol incised above the bed, but she took a sheet and covered up its face.

Joseph said unto her, "The face of the idol you have covered up. Concerning him about whom is written, 'The eyes of the Lord that run to and fro through the whole earth' (Zech. 4:10), all the more so! [God will see no matter what you do.]"²³

Quranic commentaries do not mention an idol but indicate visions of Jacob as stopping Joseph. Al-Thalabi explains:

And they entered the house and she locked the doors and he went to loosen his trousers, when suddenly the *figure of Jacob appeared to him, standing in the house and biting his fingers*, saying, "O Joseph, do not have intercourse with her. If you do not have intercourse with her, *you are like the bird in the sky who is not caught. If you have intercourse with her, you are like the bird when it dies and falls to the ground, unable to defend itself.* If you do not have intercourse with her, you are like a difficult ox upon whom no work can be done, whereas if you have intercourse with her, you are like an ox when he dies and ants come at the base of his horns and he cannot defend himself." So Joseph tied his trousers up and left at a run ...

Others say a voice proclaimed from beside the house, "Will you fornicate and be like the bird whose feathers fall out, and who finds he has no feathers when he tries to fly?" Yet others have said that Joseph saw written on the wall, "Do not come near to adultery. Verily it is an abomination and an evil way" (Quran 17:32).²⁴

Al-Baidawi relates the proof similarly, saying:

Some say that he saw Gabriel, others that a mental picture of his father biting his fingers came before him, others a (mental picture of) Qitfir, others that a voice cried to him, "Joseph, you are written down among the prophets, and yet you are doing the deed of fools."²⁵

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Jewish texts develop elaborate details resembling the rendition of Jami.²⁶ The twelfth-century Jewish commentary *Sefer ha-Yashar* describes an elaborate palatial setting,

²² Beeston, 1963: 15. ²³ Neusner, 1985: 232. ²⁴ al-Ta'labi, 2002: 155–156.

²⁵ Beeston, 1963: 15.

²⁶ Lassner (1993) discusses the historic interchange between Muslim and Jewish sources.

including the assembly of ladies and the torn garment. For the first time in Jewish commentaries, it names the wife as Zulica and describes her passion with the term “soul-cleaving,” indicating both the transcendent and erotic aspects of love. The thirteenth-century *Yalkut Shomoni* describes the couple moving from room to room as he resists her persistence by evoking God.²⁷

Islamic and Jewish commentaries thus seem to have developed in tandem. This reflects both the dialogical nature of interpretive practice in both religions and the proliferation of mystical–philosophical interpretation in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries. In both, the correct version of ‘religion’ lies not in an ur-scripture, but in the legacy of perpetually renewed interpretation. Although sociopolitical relations were not always smooth between Jews and Muslims under Islamic rule, cultural interaction enabled intellectual communication. For example, Moses ben Maimon was born in Cordoba under Almoravid rule, but went into exile due to unfavorable conditions for non-Muslims after the Almohad conquest in Spain. After living and working in Fez, also an intellectual center for Muslims, he later lived in Cairo. Influenced by earlier prominent Islamic thinkers, his philosophy and writings influenced later thinkers regardless of confession. Geographies of premodern Jewish and Islamic thought often overlapped, particularly through the strong presence of Sephardic communities in Spain and North Africa and the continuity of pre-Islamic communities in Iran. Maimon’s legacy suggests the possibility of an interpretive environment for the story of Joseph and Zuleikha bounded less by religion as identity but permeated by the interplay of considered faith.

8.2 From Theology to Poetry

The story’s timelessness contributes to its pedagogical efficacy: a young woman, married to an impotent old man, falls in forbidden love with a young man of lower rank. Upon discovery of their liaison, she tries to protect her honor by accusing him of rape. Yet women are always to blame. Poetry elucidates how the curiously salacious “most beautiful of stories” functions as a morality tale: *tafsir* for the masses.

This transition from scripture to romance emerges in the writings of Suhrawardi. Zuleikha’s love becomes a metaphor for abjection in the face of the divine. In his rendition:

²⁷ Gur-Klein, 2001.

When Zuleikha heard these words she made a house for Love and held him in greater esteem than her own life until such time as Joseph entered Egypt. The people of Egypt were put into consternation, and the news reached Zuleikha. She told Love of this affair. He seized her by the collar, and off they went to see Joseph. When Zuleikha beheld him she wanted to go forward, but her heart's foot struck the stone of amazement and she fell out of the circle of patience. She stretched out the hand of blame and ripped the veil of chastity from herself and, all at once, turned melancholic. The people of Egypt fell upon her cloak.²⁸

Radically condensing the tale, Suhrawardi presents the regal throne of Joseph and Zuleikha as the site where Jacob and his sons prostrate themselves in shame at having not recognized the divine. A story initially warning against duplicity thus became an admonition to recognize the divine through love, as used at the end of Attar's *Language of the Birds*. In his *Book of Suffering* (*Musibatnamah*), Attar also elaborated on Suhrawardi's "house for Love" by describing the paintings of herself Zuleikha commissioned to attract Joseph.²⁹

In his late fourteenth-century *Bustan*, Sa'di crystallized the narrative climax of the seduction scene. Yet instead of focusing on the drama of the seduction or the internalized vision of Joseph, Sa'di incorporates Zuleikha's idol, as mentioned in Genesis Rabbah.

Zuleikha, drunk with the wine of love,
 Hung by the hand on Joseph's skirts;
 So hard she yielded to appetite's demon
 That she had fallen on him like a wolf.
 Now, that Egyptian lady had a marble idol
 To which she was devoted, morn and evening,
 And at that moment she covered up its face and head,
 Lest it should have an ugly view of what went forward;
 Grief-stained, Joseph in a corner sat,
 Hands upon head against the tyranny of lower-self;
 Zuleikha now kissed his two hands and feet;
 "Weakling in your promises, insubordinate, come on!
 Draw not your face to frown in anvil-heartedness!
 Scatter not this moment sweet in sourness!"
 At this, down his countenance a stream from out his eyes began to flow;
 "Desist, seek not impurity from me!
 You before a stone became ashamed:
 Let me feel shame before the Pure Lord Himself!

²⁸ Suhrawardi, 1982: 70. ²⁹ Attar, 2017: 126.

Though you be penitent, what profit to your hand can come
When you have dissipated your whole life's capital?"³⁰

Later in the *Bustan*, Sa'di further elaborates the trope of the idol through reference to that of Somnath (See [Chapter 1.2](#)). Rather than condemning idolatry, however, Sa'di compares the idol to the beloved, reflects sympathetically on the experiences of Hindus, and associates the idol with the human condition as a puppet in God's hand.³¹

Whereas in Nizami the physical and imaginary image are often narratively interchangeable, here emphasis on the idolatrous relationship with an object becomes a dual metaphor for forbidden sexual attraction and for unrestrained love of divinity. In contrast to Nizami's icons in *Shirin and Khosrau* and *The Seven Icons* (see [Chapter 7.4b](#)), this icon is a true idol, falsely endowed with divine powers. Rather than serving as a transitional object for the instigation of passion, recognition of the idol as sacrilegious brings Joseph to his monotheistic senses. Sa'di's inclusion of the idol would become central not only for Jami, but also in the popular Ottoman retelling by Hamdi (d. 1509).³²

Jami's most radical narrative alteration transforms Zuleikha into the protagonist. He introduces her as a beautiful young princess with numerous royal suitors. Able to make her own decisions despite her father's desire that she marry, she rejects her suitors, for she has fallen in love with a man she encountered in a dream.

The eyes that see the form of things were closed in sleep; but those other eyes, the eyes of her heart, were wide open: and with them she suddenly saw a youth; or rather a pure spirit, a radiant apparition from the realm of light, eclipsing the hours in the gardens of eternity.

His form was erect like a slender tree; his nobility of bearing put even the proud cypress to shame. His hair, hanging down in chain-like ringlets, was enough to fetter the reason of the wisest mortal.³³

The dream enacts the mechanism of love as described by the Brethren of Purity, who say: "The image of the beloved is depicted in the soul of the lover, and representations of his form are inscribed upon his heart, and that is his recompense."³⁴ Zuleikha confides her vision to her nurse, who, like Shirin's handmaidens, initially believes it to be demonic. Yet Zuleikha

³⁰ Wickens, 1974: 236. ³¹ Homerin, 1983: 40–42. ³² Gibb, 1965: 141. ³³ Jami, 1980: 14.

³⁴ Wright, 2004: 174.

conceives of her dream as an image more real than matter: "The image which fills my aching heart is more solid than a marble carving, which neither wind nor wave can ever efface."³⁵ As in Nizami, the dream functions no differently than a physical picture in instigating action. The ambiguity between transgression and transcendence exonerates Zuleikha's passion. Jami points out that "all of us are like Zuleikha: slaves of opinion and victims of appearances. If reality did not peep out from behind appearances, how should the sincere of heart ever reach the fashioner of appearances?"³⁶ The dream serves not as a deception, but as a transitional object ultimately enabling real perception. He exhorts the reader to identify with Zuleikha as her passions evolve from the worldly to the divine.

After several further oneiric visitations where she falls at the man's feet and he declares his love for her, he tells her that he is the grand vizier of Egypt. Although no wedding offers come from Egypt, she persuades her father to send emissaries to arrange her betrothal. Arriving in Egypt, she discovers that the real vizier, named Aziz, is not the man of her dreams. She despairs about giving her virginity to this unforeseen husband. But the divine archangel comforts her, saying, "He will leave your silver lock untouched, for his key is of the softest wax."³⁷ Indeed, when she and Yusuf wed at the end of Jami's tale, he is pleased to find her a virgin.

Unlike earlier renditions emphasizing Yusuf's beauty as inherited from his mother Rachel, here his beauty, radiating from divine prophecy, is explicitly compared with the power of polytheistic idols. Upon meeting him, the vizier wishes to prostrate himself before him, but Yusuf stops and says, "Abase yourself only before God." "And for all the crestfallen idols of Egypt, Yusuf was a tablet from which their names had been expunged. For once the sun had risen, what else is there for a star to do but hide?"³⁸

When Zuleikha sees him for sale as a slave and recognizes him as her beloved, she must have him, but her husband says, "All the wealth laid up in my treasury – gold, jewelry and perfumes – does not amount to half"³⁹ the sum asked for him. So Zuleikha contributes "her box of pearls, a veritable galaxy of twinkling stars"⁴⁰ to the purchase. Yusuf, an object of beauty purchased by a wealthy newlywed couple, could just as well be an idol, or (in today's terms) a work of art.

In case there was any doubt of the religious nature of Jami's narrative, he here introduces a short interlude with an Egyptian woman named Bazigha

³⁵ Jami, 1980: 19. ³⁶ Jami, 1980: 15. ³⁷ Jami, 1980: 34. ³⁸ Jami, 1980: 50.

³⁹ Jami, 1980: 53. ⁴⁰ Jami, 1980: 53.

who hears of Yusuf's beauty and falls in love with him. Unlike Zuleikha, she is driven not by the image but by the spoken word, which binds her more loosely to the fetters of sight and allows her to relinquish her lust more easily. When she meets him she asks the source of his beauty. He explains:

I am the handiwork of that creator, in whose ocean I am content to be the merest droplet. The whole sky is nothing but a dot from the pen of his perfection; the whole world is merely a bud in the garden of his beauty; the sun is but a single ray of the light of his wisdom; the vault of heaven a mere bubble in the sea of his omnipotence.

Hidden behind the veil of mystery, his beauty was ever free of the slightest trace of imperfection. From the atoms of the world he created a multitude of mirrors, and into each of them he cast the image of his face; for to the perceptive eye, anything which appears to be beautiful is only a reflection of that countenance.

Now that you have seen the reflection, make all haste to its source; for in that primordial light, the reflection is entirely eclipsed. Beware of lingering far from that primal source; or else when the reflection fades you will be left in darkness.⁴¹

Whereas Bazigha heeds his words and renounces her worldly life, the path for the visually and oneirically inspired Zuleikha proves both more arduous and more rewarding. First, she sends her nurse to announce her love of Yusuf, but to no avail: he refuses to betray his master. She gives him a garden full of beautiful maidens to enjoy. "Though idols to look at," Jami explains, "They were in fact idolatresses."⁴² Yusuf has his preacherly way with them: after a night of sermons, they all convert to monotheism. "The idols had all been shattered: now all fingers were plying rosary beads, all tongues were proclaiming the one true God."⁴³

Told to do so by her nurse, Zuleikha builds a palace replete with images. The magnificence of the palace underscores the theme of material temptation set against the internalized vision of immaterial, divine beauty as the goal of faith.

She took by the hand the master artist:
From his hand's every finger, a hundred arts and more!
Accomplished in architect's rule,
A guide in astronomy's laws
His figuration made easy the *Almagest's* toil
And his doubt might cause Euclid to fear;
If his grip lacked a compass,

⁴¹ Jami, 1980: 56. ⁴² Jami, 1980: 73. ⁴³ Jami, 1980: 74.

He traced its work with two fingers;
 When he wished a line's mark, of a sudden,
 From his innermost nature, drew he straight – and without ruled paper!
 He might leap far as high as the satin-dark arch
 And fix corbelations upon Saturn's own vault!
 When his hand took a turn to the chisel,
 The very stone turned softer than the rawest wet brick;
 When he set his mind on to design,
 Lovely traces in thousands sprang up there in tendrils;
 The world's structures, and all without zenith or base,
 Might he show, all of them, on the nail of his finger;
 Through the painting he wrought, when so cast he his glance,
 From his pen-brush, adorned he the Tablet of Being;
 In figuration, whatsoever from his pen-brush he drew,
 From its flow, every soul sprang alive!
 Upon a stone, if he traced a bird's figure,
 The very stone turned weightless – flew forth from its place!
 By the Nurse's command, the goldhanded artist
 Raised on its foundations the castle, gold-studded:
 *The pure sheen of its slabs: is a dawn of joy!
 *The space of its halls: is a treasure of hope!
 Its corridors smoothed with carpets of marble
 And its doors worked in ebony, ivory:
 Encircled one in the other, therein Seven Halls
 Like unto Seven Thrones, this age has none their like!⁴⁴

The poem invites two competing readings: a guileful nanny goads her ward to spend lavishly on a sexual lure; or the divine architect is guided by a woman to build a universe of beauty that fosters love. Convincingly arguing that nannies in medieval Persian literary romances suggest not simply the feminization of guile but also the generational heritability that makes it apply to all women in the context of Persian literary romances, Ferzaneh Milani focuses on the literal approach to the text.⁴⁵ Affiliating her interpretation of guile through reference to Western feminist critiques of the persistent patriarchal rendition of woman as evil, she references the common appropriation of Aziz's condemnation of all women as guileful as central to Jami's narrative. While clearly reflective of contemporary uses of the passage, Jami's participation in such popular misogyny is unclear. Just as art history occludes aspects of Islamic perception through its

⁴⁴ Barry, 2004: 204. ⁴⁵ Milani, 1999.

Christianate episteme, the transregional imposition of a globalized teleology of universal patriarchy runs the risk of occluding complex engagements with gender and sexuality.

If we interpret the poem as a metaphor, Zuleikha's intimacy with the divine functions very much like that of the Chinese princess behind the images in the Fortress of Form. For is the "master artist" whose hand she takes merely a great architect, capable of building a great palace? Or is he the Divine, who builds the heavens and, within them, the Tablet of Being, capable of bringing stone to life? Certainly Zuleikha has no capacity to trick the all-knowing Divine into building a devious trap for her. What appears in the worldly realm as deceit emerges in the sacral realm as worship.

The ambiguity between the physical and divine artist not only exonerates Zuleika as the representative of female guile, but suggests that divine grace enables the artist, who therefore does not sin. This rendition of creative genius reflects a distinction between Islamic and Kantian aesthetics. For Kant, the artist performing on the stage of creation assumes divine subjectivity, enabling the artist to create like/as God, "without concepts, as a pure and free productivity of the imagination."⁴⁶ Islamic thought conceives of the relationship between God and nature not as a God bound by rules (a rationalist, Mu'tazilite position), but as a God choosing at every moment not to violate apparent rules (except in the case of miracles) by expressing presence through an ordered system pervading all levels of creation, from the perceptual through *barzakh* and on to the divine. For Jami, the engagement in creativity is not one that functions freely, outside of rules but, through the permission of God, chooses to perfect those rules in its expression.

Zuleikha seeks to replicate the power of her oneiric images through the power of the physical image. To this end, she has the palace decorated with images of her and Yusuf in moments of passion.

Everywhere in this Hall, the image-maker
Wrought a semblance of Joseph with a painting of Zulaykha
Together seated as Beloved and Lover
In love of soul's and heart's embrace:
Here he kissed her lip,
There she loosened his sash.

*Should a glance [from any other artist] but thereupon glide,

*Envy's water from his own mouth should flow.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Rodowick, 2009: 97. ⁴⁷ Barry, 2004: 204–205.

As Zuleikha expresses her passion when Yusuf enters her chamber, the paintings apparently multiply. Sexual desire metaphorically expresses the agency of the image. Just as, in Nizami's *Shirin and Khosrau*, the dream of Khosrau enables the materialization of Shapur's paintings for Shirin, Zuleikha's dream comes alive in paintings. Like Shirin, Yusuf cannot resist the powerful images.

So she made known her pain
 To Joseph and her lust –
 But Joseph glared as if within himself
 And held aloof from fear of broil
 And stared down at the chamber's rug –
 And saw himself and her! in imagery depicted,
 Embroidered on the carpet's silk,
 Hugging each other, breast against her breasts –
 From such a picture, swift! He turned his glance
 And saw himself depicted everywhere:
 If he looked at the door, if he looked on the wall,
 He saw his cheek coupled to hers in twin roses:
 And lifted his face to his God in the heavens
 And saw the same scene on the ceiling.⁴⁸

The infinite multiplication of the image suggests a dizzying hall of mirrors resembling Yusuf's description of the infinity of creation. It also reflects wall painting as a normal element in palace design, exemplified by the *suratkhana* (picture house or portrait gallery) of Baysunghur ibn Shahrukh (d. 1433) and other Timurid palaces.⁴⁹

Like the secret room in Bahram Gur's palace, here painting embodies desire (See [Chapter 7.4b](#)). However, rather than situating love of the beloved within a scaled cosmos in which the physical world represents the microcosm in macrocosm, Jami focuses on the experience of longing itself by transposing the physical experience of lust onto the transcendent desire for union with the divine. This sexualization may reflect the open discussion of sexuality in Timurid literature, exemplified by Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Nafzawi's early fifteenth-century *The Perfumed Garden of Sensual Delight*.

Unlike in the Judaic versions, Zuleikha's lust is neither sinful nor treacherous, but a model for how humans must transcend natural sexual desire, regulating it through spiritual union with the divine. Yusuf embodies this overwhelming confluence of sexuality with spirituality. Jami inverts the plain narrative of good against evil, male fidelity against

⁴⁸ Barry, 2004: 204–206. ⁴⁹ Lentz, 1993: 254; Karev, 2005.

female guile, by expanding on those elements in the Quran that allow for sympathetic interpretations of sexuality and female desire.

The unprecedented eroticism enlivening the scene reflects the Sufi recognition of sexuality as a transcendent experience simulating the passionate desire for annihilation in God. It echoes ibn Arabi's assertion that in sexual intercourse, the man is annihilated in the woman, but that this is in fact annihilation in God.⁵⁰ Like Zuleikha, Yusuf falls prey not only to his human sexual desire, but also to his own beauty. Zuleikha recognizes this, saying: "You only feel lust for your very own self!"⁵¹ The poem reveals Yusuf's self-reflexive and self-sufficient desire as narcissistically inverted. It thus reflects a similar understanding of sexuality as that expressed by ibn Arabi:

Because God contains the totality of all meanings of the universe, and indeed is the place where opposites are conjoined, he is both active/male and receptive/female. Therefore it is insufficient for man to contemplate himself by himself to understand God; the best and most perfect kind of contemplation of God is in woman. Sexual union imitates God's relationship with man, 'the man yearning for his Lord Who is his origin,' as woman yearns for man. His Lord made women dear to him, just as God loves that which is in his own image.⁵²

Jami's recognition of female sexual desire and pleasure thus reverberates with the cosmology of ibn Arabi, who understood the recognition of the gendered Other as a microcosm of the recognition of divine alterity to humanity. Having been oneirically initiated into divine vision, partaking in it becomes her right no less than his.

Consistently inverting conventional interpretations, ibn Arabi elevates the pleasurable aspect of sexuality above the procreative, comparing pleasure to paradise and procreation to animals, whom he designates as particularly noble because they signify life. He argues that our subjugation to our passions reflects the position of servitude of the gnostic. "If it did not have complete nobility indicating the weakness appropriate to servanthood, it would not have such an overwhelming pleasure which causes a person to pass away from his own strength and pretensions."⁵³ Thus Yusuf's adoption of Zuleikha's lust does not take him farther from prophecy, but closer. Their mutual desire inverts the relationship between lover and beloved, indicated as well by Jami:

⁵⁰ Hoffman-Ladd, 1992: 88. ⁵¹ Barry, 2004: 206. ⁵² Hoffman-Ladd, 1992: 89.

⁵³ Hoffman-Ladd, 1992: 89.

Heal and free mine own lust, hug me close to yourself
Because, while I thirst, you are Life's very fountain –

Rather than the tension between evanescent worldly beauty and mortality expressed in the seduction dialogues by al-Thalabi and al-Kisa'i, Jami allows Zuleikha to conceptualize Yusuf through the architectural symbolism of prayer.

By these twin arches of your archer's double bow,
Like a MIHRAB –
Your twin eyebrows like an archer's double bow
With its twinned arches like a Prayer Niche!⁵⁴

Like the confusion of lover and beloved, the description of eyebrows like a double bow inverts the one taking aim with the target – his eyebrows both thrust the arrow of lust, but also, as a mihrab, receive it. Sex and prayer converge.

Yusuf responds by representing his prophecy as a mirror of the divine that would be shattered through her demand. Instead, her demand must be channeled into recognition of all the world as an image of the divine.

Today embrace me not, nor hold me tight
Nor with a stone presume to shatter
my pure mirror bright ...
By him without the like – when every like is His image,
And all within, and all without, is His image!⁵⁵

The mirror is both the images on the walls, showing them in their love-making, but also the pure mirror of Yusuf's soul that will be defiled if they complete the act. Yet every person and every act is also an embodiment of the divine – there is no space outside the text for a God who is the absolute embodiment of all creation and agency.

Jami articulates the delirium of this passion for the divine through intensely erotic imagery that brings the lovers to the point of coitus.

With her lips she drank up the sugar from his mouth
And collared her neck with his arms
And belted her waist with his legs
And made herself a target for his shaft
In the lust of his pearl
To turn her body into his own shell.

⁵⁴ Barry, 2004: 207. ⁵⁵ Barry, 2004: 207.

But Joseph loosened not the dart
 From his archer's ring
 Unto her proffered target,
 Nor shattered he the seal of her shell
 Therein to drop his own pearl.
 His heart yearned to bore her shell
 With his diamond-point,
 But his chastity held guardian sway ...
 Of a sudden, in the midst of their fray, His eye caught sight of a brocaded
 curtain
 Drawn clear across a corner of the room ...
 An idol, golden-bodied, and of gemstones his eyes.⁵⁶

By maintaining the icon introduced by Sa'di as the proof that stops Joseph from sin, Jami unites fornication and idolatry not simply as forbidden, but as a necessary to transcendence.

An example of this transcendence of absolute sin through the idol can be found in the controversial abrogated verses of the Quran, often referred to as the 'satanic' or 'bird' verses. The Quran refers ambiguously to these passages: "We have never sent any messenger or prophet before you [Muhammad] into whose wishes Satan did not insinuate something, but god removes what Satan insinuates and then God affirms his message" (Q22:52).⁵⁷ Early biographies of the Prophet relate that during the recitation of one of the early suras of the Quran (the Star), Muhammad undermined his message of absolute monotheism. In contrast to the Quranic passage where he points to the pre-Islamic goddesses al-Lat, al-'Uzza, and Manat as idols rather than divinities (Q53:19–20), such early reports suggest that he hoped to please the Meccans and persuade them to convert by acknowledging the reality of pre-Islamic gods and goddesses. While medieval interpretations of the passage made some allowance for the fallibility of the Prophet enabling such ambiguities, modern orthodoxy later declared such reports as ahistorical and heretical.⁵⁸ Thus in the context that Jami was writing, the fallibility of a prophet remained an acceptable trope through which to engage the recognition of the Absolute.

This theme appears clearly as well in ibn Arabi's interpretation of the Quranic revelation of the stories of Noah and the worshipers of the golden calf. For him, the Quranic phrase "Your Lord *determined* that you will not

⁵⁶ Barry, 2004: 209. ⁵⁷ Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 212. ⁵⁸ Ahmed, 1998: 72–73.

worship other than He” (Q17:23) functions as a description of reality, not as a command. Since the oneness of God is absolute, all acts of worship are de facto toward God, whether their practitioners possess the knowledge to recognize the transcendental divine or not. Thus God made Harun unable to stop the followers of the golden calf, so that God could be worshiped “in every form.”⁵⁹

Similarly, Jami’s Yusuf articulates the power of the idol to remind him of his devotion to the omniscient unseen.

You feel shame before a dead glance
And trouble your mind, disturbed
By this mere lifeless thing.
And should I not fear from the One
Who sees all, and knows all,
The Eternal, Almighty?

So he spoke,
And rose up from their fray,
Awoke from the couch of their merry dreams
And withdrew his letter aleph
(like to an upright stick)
From the twin prongs of her letters lam-aleph
(the calligram drawn like a fork)

And freed his candle scented with camphor
From her silver and wick-nipping scissor.⁶⁰

Yusuf unambiguously sins alongside Zuleikha. Yet the sin is neither fornication nor adultery, and the message is not that of the wiles of women. Rather, the sin that both have committed equally is *shirk*: replacing God with the idol Yusuf.

Jami underscores this distinction by using a vocabulary of letters even more provocative than the graphic description by al-Thalabi, essentially representing him as withdrawing his penis from her vagina. His choice of aleph and lam in the poem are not arbitrary or simply anthropomorphic – the chapter begins with the mysterious letters aleph lam re. The aleph, shaped in Arabic like an upright stick, is the first letter of the word for God, Allah. Michael Barry glosses lam-aleph as a calligram looking like a fork (and thus the open legs/lips of the woman), particularly in the Thuluth script often used to write Qurans. The letters (l-a) also mean no, articulated at the beginning the *shahada*, the phrase of witnessing, “La ilaha illa Allah”

⁵⁹ Ahmed, 2015: 27–29. ⁶⁰ Barry, 2004: 211.

(there is no God but God). Yusuf thereby removes the Godhead (his aleph and his penis) inherent in him as a prophet from the “No,” written in the “fork.” He thereby enacts the phrase “there is no God but God,” by avoiding the sexual climax representing divine union. While such an interpretation seems sacrilegious, within the framework that none of creation is external to divine will, the avoidance of such a metaphor would be to hold the letters or sexuality sacred, which would result in the sin of *shirk*. Just as Jami earlier likened Yusuf to a mihrab which points to the divine, here he reminds the reader that the bodies of both Yusuf and Zuleikha are literally composed of letters as they exist in text, both in the Quran and in his poem. The various sins that the reader witnesses ultimately take place between these letters and their imagination. The sin never happened – it is the reader’s own imagination that might fool them into thinking it did.

The association between letters, the human body, and mystical numbers was elaborated by Fadallah of Astarabad (1339–40), who interpreted the mystical dimension of the ‘extra’ letters that appear at the beginning of some Quranic suras through the revelation of what he called “the book of Adam,” who was the first to receive the meanings of the letters. The practice Fadallah initiated came to be known as Hurufism, and was practiced in several Sufi sects. Although he was executed, probably under Timur, his ideas flourished, particularly after the fifteenth century.⁶¹ A 1454 book by Siraj of Shiraz, who worked in the Deccan kingdom of Bihar, entitled *The Bounty of the Lovers*, about the spiritual and aesthetic dimensions of calligraphy cites earlier sources as rooting the link between calligraphy, the Sufi tradition of lovers, and the tradition of ibn Muqla. He relates that one of the children of the caliph, a pupil of ibn Muqla, returned from a stroll. When his father asked what he had found, he answered that he had heard the following verse:

My lover’s teeth are in the form of the [letter] *sin*,
 And his mouth’s shape is like a rounded *mim*.
 Together they spell poison (*samm*); amazing, by my life!
 After I tasted it, there was no doubt.

Finding the poem nonsensical when considered in relation to the then-prevalent square Kufic script, he consulted with ibn Muqla, who, after meditating on the matter, invented the rounded forms of Naksh. His

⁶¹ Mir-Kasimov, 2008.

meditation is described through the metaphor of “massaging the clay of Adam with my hands,” similarly combining the form of man – made by God from the clay of Adam – and the form of letters.⁶² Thus the tale provides an apocryphal reason for earlier generations of calligraphic innovation which intimately ties the word, its form, sensual human beauty, and Sufi metaphors of divine love with divine creation.

The seventeenth-century calligraphic master Baba Shah of Isfahan similarly praises master calligraphy by Sultan ‘Ali of Mashhad:

His *alifs* were like tall sapling-figures that give peace to the soul, and the eye of his *sad* was like the eye of youthful sweethearts. His *dal* and *lam* were like the tresses of heart-ravishing beloved, and the circles of the *nun* were like the eyebrows of devastating beauties. Every one of his dots was like the pupil of the dark-eyed, and every one of his strokes was like the water of life in the darkness of running ink.⁶³

Jami’s calligraphic metaphors engage in a practice common with the Sufi *madhab-i ishq* (sect of love). Shahab Ahmed’s discussion of love in the *ghazal* poetic form applies as well for Jami’s integration of love into his poetry.

Love in the *ghazal* is at once carnal love, as well as chaste Platonic love, and love for/of the Divine; the beloved is at once the tantalizing fleshly object of physical desire, as well as a beautiful youth who manifests and thus bears witness by virtue of his/her chaste beauty to the Beauty of the Divine, or is simply God himself.⁶⁴

Yusuf’s beauty thus signals divine beauty. Yet as a prophet, a mere man and patently not divine, he also serves as a warning against idolizing the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, whom he metaphorically represents.

More than the theme of sexuality, the novelty of Jami’s work emerges in the inextricable combination of the sexual and the visual, as repeated through the dream, the elaborate palace with its numerous paintings, the idol, and ultimately Zuleikha’s blindness which opens her to inner sight. The romance reflects the ethics of a more didactic portion of Jami’s *Haft Awrang*, the collection that includes *Yusuf and Zuleikha*. Jami says:

It is said that a disciple went to a Sufi master
That he might guide him upon his journey:
The master said, “If you have not set foot in the realm of love;
Go! First, become a lover – and only after that come back to us!
For, without having emptied the wine-cup of the Form (*surat*)

⁶² Ernst, 2003: 436. ⁶³ Ernst, 1992: 283. ⁶⁴ Ahmed, 2015: 36.

You will not attain to taste the draught of Meaning (*ma'ni*)
 Do not, though, tarry overlong with the Figure (*surat*)
 But bring yourself swift across this bridge.”⁶⁵

His sentiment closely resembles Plotinus' acceptance of physical beauty as a prelude to the divine. Plotinus' description of material phenomena as “playthings” does not make those who have experienced non-corporeal beauty repudiate the body, because in it they recognize the echo of higher beauty in the phenomenon of love.

There are souls to whom earthly beauty is a leading to the memory of that in the higher realm and these love the earthly as an image; those that have not attained to this memory do not understand what is happening within them, and take the image for the reality. Once there is perfect self-control, it is no fault to enjoy the beauty of the earth; where appreciation degenerates into carnality, there is sin.⁶⁶

As for Jami, the image has a double valence between a physical manifestation and the reality it potentially hides, and the sexual love and the love of the divine which it makes present in earthly form.

Whereas Yusuf is redeemed through his stay in prison, ultimately enabling his rise as leader of Egypt, Zuleikha's redemption lags. It begins with the banquet she gives for the local scolds, who cut their hands upon seeing Joseph. Probably the most frequently illustrated scene of the tale, it encapsulates the redemptive cast of Jami's narration. An illustrated Judeo-Persian version was penned in 1853, with iconography similar to that of Islamic texts. [Plate 15] Probably executed in Mashhad by crypto-Jews who maintained their faith despite being forced to overtly practice Islam as of 1839, it nonetheless underscores the shared culture of Jews and Muslims in Iran that informed the entire interpretive history of the narrative and underscores the Eurocentrism of the term “Judeo-Christian”. As Graves suggests, the cultural overlap of objects points to the unsustainability of the “religio-cultural silos” where taxonomic art history has traditionally segregated them.⁶⁷

The frequency of the scene's illustration, common on nineteenth-century Qajar tiles set in spaces that would be used for social gatherings, suggests the absolution offered by Jami as the preferred moral of the story. As the women cut their hands and bite their lips, losing themselves in admiration, they discover that nobody can fail to fall in love with the divine. Far from shameful, romance becomes sacral. Whereas earlier in the

⁶⁵ Ahmed, 2015: 38. ⁶⁶ Halliwell, 2002: 319; Plotinus, 1991: 175 (III.5.1).

⁶⁷ Graves, 2018: 179; Amar, 2012: 110.

story a group of women converts through the utterances of Yusuf – his discourse of the law – here, a group of women converts through a visionary experience guided through an eroticized framework of love. In keeping with al-Ghazali (see [Chapter 4.2](#)), Jami thus recognizes the power of demonstrative theology, but prefers the Sufi path.

The conclusion of the tale traces Zuleikha's redemption through formulas of abjection bridging the gap between histories of dervishes and the romance genre. She ultimately gives up her idol and goes blind. This strengthens the inner vision underlying her passion. Thus able to see without seeing, she ultimately comes before Yusuf. He prays for the restoration of her (physical) sight, they marry and have a family. He dies, and she dies at his grave.

Jami's deployment of sexual themes for religious teaching was not unique. Not only does Jalal al-Din Rumi's *Mathnawi* include sexual anecdotes, but some were even illustrated in a well-funded illustrated edition produced around 1530 in the royal atelier of the second Safavid ruler, Shah Tahmasp, only a few decades after Jami penned his poem. The scenes, which describe tales about "The man up a pear tree who saw his wife and her lover together" and "The woman who discovered her maidservant having improper relations with an ass," were no doubt as amusing in their own time as they are today. However, rather than segregating these stories as pornographic, this manuscript highlights them through refined illustration [[Figure 11](#)]. In a manner reminiscent of ibn Muqaffa's exhortation to take fables seriously (See [Chapter 3.2](#)), Rumi underscores the meaningfulness of his bawdy humor:

(My) bawdy (*hazl*) is instruction, listen to it in seriousness
 Do not be taken up with its exterior jest (*hazl*).
 To jesters (*hazilan*) every serious matter is a jest
 To the wise all jests are serious.⁶⁸

The stories titillate because they are impolite, but they are not erotic in that they use humor to avoid arousing sexual desire in the reader. Rather, they call attention to important messages by inciting curiosity. Jami takes this rhetorical trick one step further, arousing the desire of the reader through an elaborate description of interrupted coitus. If this proves shocking to us today, it reflects more on the projection of our modern prudery on the past than on the frank discussions of sexuality in historical texts.

Zuleikha's abjection on the path of love resembles that in a parable related in Attar's *Language of the Birds*. In it, the elderly and highly

⁶⁸ Tourage, 2005: 207 (IV: 3558).

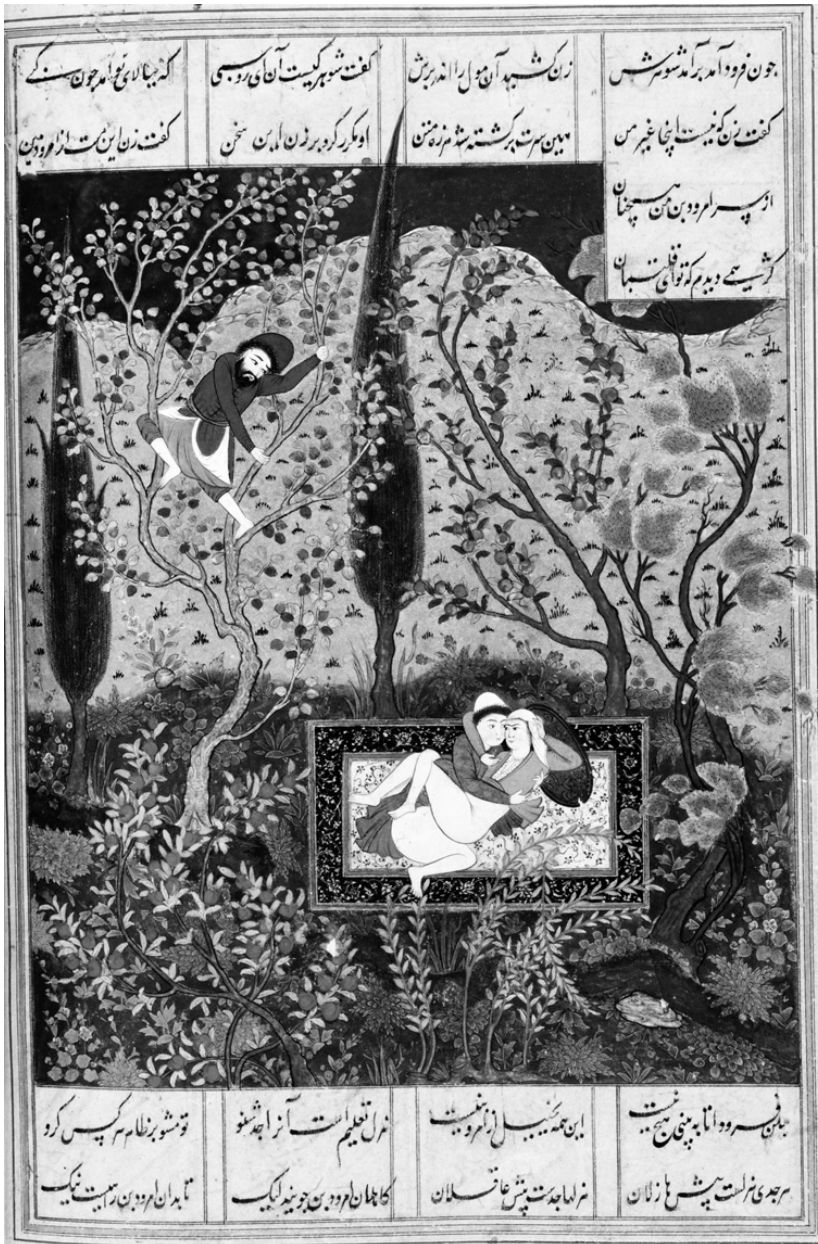


Figure 11 Anonymous, *Man up a Pear Tree Who Saw His Wife and Her Lover Together*, from a *Masnavi* by Jalal al-Din Rumi, 1530. The British Library, Add MS 27263, fol. 270b. © The British Library Board

respected Shaykh San'an of Mecca begins to see dreams in which he lives in Constantinople and bows before an idol. Likening himself to Joseph trapped in the well, he travels to the distant city with 400 followers in tow. There, he glimpses a Christian princess and falls in love.

Now when the Christian girl so pulled aside her veil,
 She bound up the sheikh in a bind of her hair
 And so cast him down into the pyre!
 When she showed him her face
 From under veils of her hair,
 From every hair of her veil
 Did he bind him a cord
 Into hundreds of folds, like a Byzantine monk, all around him.
 Hardly needed the sheikh for to look further to her,
 To this girl of the Christians, love's work wrought upon him,
 His heart leaped from his hand, down he fell at her feet,
 Where he fell there was only a fire
 To burn there, from his top to his toe he turned into a pyre
 And all that was left of his heart in the fire
 Was a black wisp of smoke:
 melancholy's.⁶⁹

In the context of the frame story, reference to the pyre associates Shaykh San'an with the phoenix, destroyed on the pyre only to rise again, as well as al-Hallaj, renouncing self for love of God.

When she discovers him abased before her palace, she toys with him, making him convert to Christianity, drink wine, bow before images, and ultimately become her swineherd. Yet the poem makes clear that his abasement is also self-abnegation.

He put aside the Self and selfish lust;
 In grief he smeared his locks with filth and dust.

Similarly, after Joseph's imprisonment, Zuleikha eventually gives up all her wealth, beauty, idolatry, and her eyesight in longing for the beloved. In both cases, the beloved, like the idol, functions as a transitional object toward the true love of the ineffable divine.

Like Joseph, Shaykh San'an finds himself in the hands of a manipulative seductress. Unlike Joseph, however, he is no prophet. Instead, like Zuleikha, he is the lover, utterly undone by his devotion.

⁶⁹ Barry, 2004: 17.

The old wine sidled through the old man's veins
 And like a twisting compass turned his brains;
 Old wine, young love, a lover far too old,
 Her soft arms welcoming – could he be cold?
 Beside himself with love and drink he cried:
 "Command me now; whatever you decide
 I will perform. I spurned idolatry
 When sober, but your beauty is to me
 An idol for whose sake I'll gladly burn
 My faith's Koran." "Now, you begin to learn,
 Now you are mine, dear sheikh," she said. "Sleep well,
 Sweet dreams; our ripening fruit begins to swell."⁷⁰

Long before Jami, Attar uses the sexual allusions of his poetry to seduce and entertain his readers through the all-too-familiar interplay of an old man falling in love with a young woman, male impotence, and female resistance. Yet it is only through stark abasement at the altar of their dream-induced love that both, male and female, old and young, transcend the self. In the Platonic tradition, true love eschews the self. In the words of Socrates, the lover does not

value anyone above the one with beauty, but quite forgets mother, brothers, friends, all together, loses wealth through neglect without caring a jot about it, and feeling contempt for all the accepted standards of propriety and good taste in which it previously prided itself, it is ready to act the part of a slave and sleep wherever it is allowed to do so, provided it is as close as possible to the object of its yearning.⁷¹

Socrates' identification of such madness as a divine gift reverberates with the frequent use in Islamic poetry of abject love as a narrative trope designating the renunciation of self in favor of the divine.

Attar further underscores the theme of idolatry as a station on the path to transcendence by telling the shaykh's followers that they had selfishly abandoned him, and should have instead stayed with him, even at the price of converting to Christianity or worshipping idols.

Love's built on readiness to share love's shame;
 Such self-regarding love usurps love's name.⁷²

⁷⁰ Attar, 1984: 66. ⁷¹ Plato, 2005: 32–33. ⁷² Attar, 1984: 70.

In both parables, the interplay of dream, palace, sexuality, and idolatry uses materiality, the image, and the idol. Far from prohibited, they are necessary. They also transcend gender: like Zuleikha, after the shaykh returns to Mecca, the Christian princess has a dream, converts, and dies on the way to him. Complicating Merguerian and Najmabadi's assertion that Jami's rendition of Zuleikha punishes female heterosexual desire, comparison with a similar story of abjection suggests that the gender of the subject may be irrelevant in relation to the Sufi moral of the tale.⁷³ Like the images in the chest of witnessing (see [Chapter 7.1](#)), once transgressions have served their purpose of revelation, they disappear in the act of redemption.

Jami's emphasis on the theme of visuality frames the issue of the image within the 'sect of love' in an era of the rapid development of Islamic book arts, particularly painting. Whereas a generation later, Dust Muhammad inscribes this discursive environment with a prose apology for the image in Islamic traditions, Jami uses the poetic frame to reconfigure the apparent threat of the image as its potential benefit.

The centrality of this discussion to Jami's work is made clear in one of the most famous paintings in the canon of Islamic art, an illustration of Zuleikha chasing Joseph through her palace of love, executed by Bihzad (1465–1535), one of the most renowned masters of Timurid painting [[Figure 12](#)]. Although the painting illustrates a copy of Sa'di's *Bustan*, it includes two verses from Jami concerning painting (indicated by * in the quotations above), producing an intertextual reading of Sa'di and Jami's interpretations within a visual setting.⁷⁴ Barry suggests that, "Indeed, when properly deciphered, Bihzad's painting of *Joseph in Zuleykha's Castle* even becomes something like a Rosetta Stone, for our understanding of medieval Islamic figurative art, since it yields us an essential key to its whole code of glyphs."⁷⁵ He argues that the inclusion of these passages amounted to an allowance for the artist to paint through the recognition of skill as a gift from God and thus a demonstration of the divine. The inclusion of the lines as though they were architectural calligraphy likens the artist to the patron, shifting the attention of the viewer from the patron to the artist as the key figure in the work.⁷⁶

Like Dust Muhammad's discussion of art and artists, this image reflects contemporary discussions of the image. Yet both works, held in imperial libraries, had relatively few admirers. In contrast, the extensive circulation of the poem by Jami, long acknowledged as "the seal of Persian poets,"

⁷³ Merguerian and Najmabadi, 1997: 500–501.

⁷⁴ Barry, 2004: 203.

⁷⁵ Barry, 2004: 199.

⁷⁶ Balafrej, 2019.

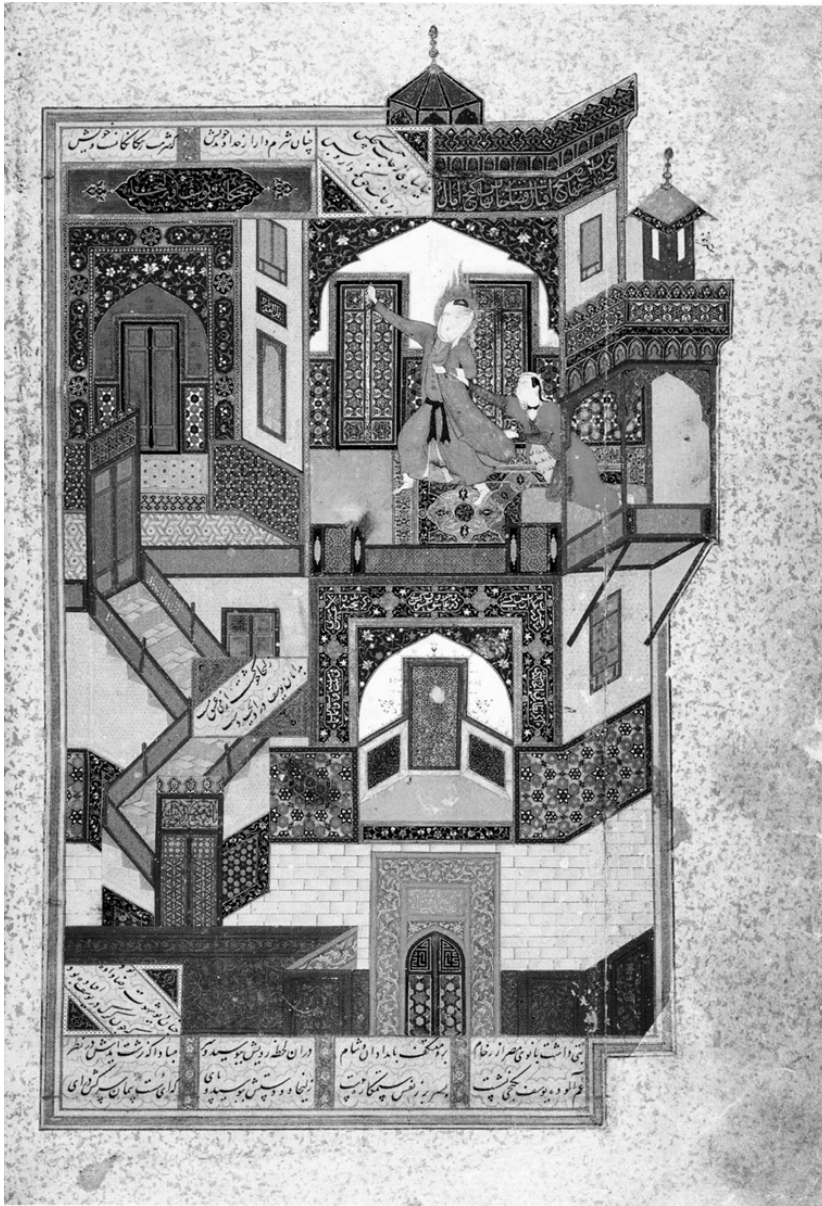


Figure 12 Bihzad, *Yusuf and Zuleikha*, from a *Bustan* by Sa'di. Egyptian National Library, Adab Farsi 908, fol. 3v

offered a far broader discursive range through which artists and audiences alike could at once partake in the attraction of the image and simultaneously deflect its seductive dangers. Rather, like the late sixteenth-century

illustrations of Nizami's *Khamisa* (see [Chapter 3](#)), the image offers a sophisticated meditation on the interplay between licit and forbidden desires.

Like the poem, the image represents the mystical longing for union with God: it shows the elusive/illusive desire to perceive God through the physical senses. More than the numerous images depicting the Prophet Muhammad as illustrations of the narrative of his prophecy, this image functions as a rare religious image in terms of guiding the internalized ritual practice of faith.⁷⁷ Rather than showing 'what' happened in the history of faith, it provides an example of 'how' faith happens.

The painting depicts the palace as if it were a dollhouse, in which exterior walls, seen at the bottom with a door that is closed, open to several intertwined interior spaces. Although the seven doors depicted, including those framing the dynamic staircase, are closed, the figures fly through space as Yusuf's realization of the omniscience of God releases him from the trap of lust. He floats over a room with a niche framed with calligraphic cartouches, providing a visual counterpart to Zuleikha's recognition of his beauty as a mihrab.

As with the *Allegory of Worldly and Otherworldly Drunkenness* (see [Chapter 2.2](#)), the image suggests the seeming opposition (*tanzih*) in similitude (*tashbih*) between her desire and the act of devotion. The dynamic movement of the two figures through a space otherwise characterized by a series of closed doors underscores the necessity of Yusuf's miracle not only for his own transcendence beyond temptation, but also for Zuleikha who, in her pursuit of him, oversteps the boundaries of physicality. Like the seven climes in Nizami's *The Seven Icons*, the seven rooms of the palace represent the sensory world of desire.⁷⁸ Their feet float above the ground. He moves because she pursues him; she moves because she cannot let him go. Their transcendence of the seduction of sexual desire depends on their rejection of the erotic images decorating the palace, as well as the idol. The sumptuous palace represents the dynamic urgency of their movement beyond its physical boundaries. Rather than illustrating the idol, reveling in the seduction, or showing the scrap of fabric condemning Zuleikha, the painting underscores the transcendence of movement through the closed palace of form at the very moment when Yusuf has found 'meaning' in his rejection of the idol. Lamia Balafrej interprets this painting less as illustrating the poem than responding to it in the classical sense of call and answer (*jawab*), as in the musical tradition.⁷⁹ Speaking more broadly of the role of

⁷⁷ Gruber, 2009. ⁷⁸ Singh, 2017: 78. ⁷⁹ Balafrej, 2019.

painting in illustrated manuscripts, Margaret Shortle explains, “It is not the beloved ... who causes desire in the audience; it is musk-smelling tresses that flutter and move in a spring breeze. Likewise, fluttering hemlines and intertwined trees or other serpentine arabesques in painting draw the viewer’s eye and invite a lingering visual engagement with the painting.”⁸⁰ Indivisible, paintings and poetry conspire in their seduction.

This understanding of the image, like love, as a vehicle for meaning became a common means of normalizing painting within Islamic culture. In his *Canon of Forms* (see [Chapter 7.4b](#)), Sadiqi Beg Afshar wrote:

I take the chattels of my ambition to the alleyway of the Figure;
I aspire to Meaning from the face of the Figure.
My heart, which had known the Art of the Figure,
Brought itself, now, the high-road of Meaning ...
So far have I come in portraying the Figure
That I have traversed ‘Figure’ and arrived at ‘Meaning.’⁸¹

Poetry explained how painting was understood to function in the world: it served as a temporary pause on the journey to meaning. It represented falsely in order to display truth. Rather than a deception, as in the story of Zeuxis, or a window onto the world, as in the post-Renaissance European tradition, the painted image functioned as a useful ruse, like a palace or a Fortress of Form.

While retaining the proper subject as male and thereby not enabling a (modern) vision of gender equality, such discourse is a far cry from the suppression of sexuality (and so-called passive sexuality in particular) in the Christian tradition reflecting modern mandatory heteronormativity in the modern Islamic world.⁸² Although the poem presents the male author’s rendition of female heterosexual desire, it also reflects contemporary sexual norms.⁸³ In contrast with common understandings of pre-modern sexualities, often based on Euronormative histories of sexuality, this work naturalizes rather than condemning passion. Jami’s assertion that we are all Zuleikha, subject to legitimate passions beyond our control, reflects a behavioral realm rooted not in the law, which does not address the complex emotional lives of individuals, but in the ethical decisions that each individual makes as governed by the discursive culture that surrounds them. Zuleikha, a model for all readers regardless of gender, is portrayed

⁸⁰ Shortle, 2018: 23. ⁸¹ Ahmed, 2015: 53. ⁸² Ze’evi, 2006; Babayan and Najmabadi, 2008.

⁸³ Merguerian and Najmabadi, 1997.

as an independent sexual agent, in possession of her own fortune, able to arrange her own betrothal, and expresses lust.

Islamic epic romances idealized heterosexual union in a sexual climate where marriage was required, but sexual relations between older and younger men remained normal. Ibn Arabi articulates this transition from passive to active sexuality as a rite of passage necessary for the development of maturity, both sexually and spiritually.

The disciple should not take up the company of women until he himself becomes a woman. If he becomes female and attaches to the lower world and sees how the higher world loves it, and sees himself in every spiritual condition and moment in perpetual sexual union as a female (*mankuhan da'iman*, i.e., assuming the receptive role in an unceasing act of coition) and does not see himself in his spiritual insight as male first, but purely female, and he becomes pregnant from that marriage and gives birth – then he may keep company with women and incline toward them, and love for them will not harm him. As for the gnostics' keeping company with women, [permission to do so] is absolute, because they see the absolute, holy, divine hand in their giving and taking.⁸⁴

Sufi literature regularly indicated the initiation of an adept through dreams of sexual intercourse between master and disciple, sometimes including rape of the youth by the older man, as a symbol of the disciple's initiation into divine love by his master.⁸⁵ In the Ottoman realm, the Arab world, and Iran, premodern taxonomies of sexuality continued well into the twentieth century, and recognized sexual desire as an act rather than as an orientation. Distinction was made between the active and passive roles rather than through the gender of the object of desire.⁸⁶

While lyric poetry frequently celebrates homosexual desire, and occasionally even refers to its consummation, epic romance features heterosexuality. This may reflect the distinct contexts of these genres. Lyric poetry was long associated with music. Until the eighth century, musicians were normally women (slave-girls). Male performers generally dressed and performed as women, and were even allowed to perform at gatherings of women, based on their presumed effeminacy.⁸⁷ Over time, female performance became associated with profligate courtesans, and male performance was normalized.

The Sufi normalization of same-gender desire can also be understood in the paradigm of ibn Arabi's counterintuitive interpretive practice, in which

⁸⁴ Hoffman-Ladd, 1992: 91. ⁸⁵ Terzioğlu, 2002: 154.

⁸⁶ El-Rouayheb, 2005; Ze'evi, 2006; Babayan and Najmabadi, 2008.

⁸⁷ Nielson, 2012: 244–245.

the elevation of that which is abject in normal life renders it divine by abasing the servant of God. Yet this works only for Sufi adepts, and remains base for the population at large. The heterosexuality of epic romances might reframe ideas from Sufi thought for non-adepts adhering to everyday, orthodox strictures.

We might also interpret these romances anthropologically, recognizing them as written within the Islamic intertextual sphere, but also partaking in a Central Asian cultural sphere in which nomadic traditions allowed for greater female independence. Themes of women who rule, who control their own marriages and fortunes, and who patronize architecture reflect political and economic power that women at times held in pre-Islamic and early Islamic Turco-Persian societies.⁸⁸ While women and men were not equal under the law, social conditions accorded both genders respect. Like *Jami*, a poem by Rumi similarly underscores women as sacred creations along with men, and reflects a hierarchy not between genders, but between the human and the animal.

The Prophet, to whose speech the whole world was enslaved, used to say, "Speak to me, O Aisha!"

The Prophet said that women dominate men of intellect and possessors of hearts,
But ignorant men dominate women, for they are shackled by the ferocity of
animals.

They have no kindness, gentleness, or love, since animality dominates their nature.
Love and kindness are human attributes, anger and sensuality belong to the
animals.

She is not your 'sweetheart'! She is the radiance of God.⁸⁹

As archetypes, figures such as Zuleikha and Shirin represent womankind as politically powerful, sexually desiring, and independent in thought and action. Although not the worldly equals of men, they have full personhood in engagement with the divine. In contrast, modern stereotypes of Muslim women as submissive reflect patriarchal understandings of Islam parallel to those in much of the rest of the world enshrined in modern law. This may reflect increasing Islamic interaction with secularist European associations between religion and the subjugation of women, exemplified in the shift from the theological to the artistic development of the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe.

⁸⁸ de Nicola, 2017. ⁸⁹ Kabbani, 1995: xxxi.

8.3 Joseph and Potiphar's Wife in Post-Reformation Europe

Whereas Islamic painters often worked closely with texts that physically and metaphorically framed their paintings, European artists often segregated visual interpretation from textual meaning. The most famous painting of the scene in the Islamic world, attributed to Bihzad, cannot be interpreted without an intertextual reading of the Quran, the poetry of Sa'di, which it illustrates, and of Jami, intertwined within the image frame. The European autonomy of painting becomes readily evident in representations of Joseph and Potiphar's wife in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. Can the same art-historical methods of iconographic and contextual analysis equally serve the interpretation of both realms of painting?

Christian interpretation of the story varied across time and place. Archbishop of Constantinople John Chrysostom's (349–407) misogynistic characterization of Potiphar's wife as a woman “afame with satanic desire,” who “fell upon the young man like a wild animal grinding its teeth” did not persist in Catholic doctrine, despite its advocacy of chastity.⁹⁰ Rejecting the monastic asceticism of the church, Martin Luther (1483–1546) used the narrative to underscore the importance of marriage by contrasting Joseph's chastity with surrounding temptations. Elsewhere advocating secret, second marriages for women with impotent husbands, he avoids the redemptive detail of Potiphar's impotence central to Jami's interpretation. He compares her treachery to that of his opponents, comparing Joseph both to Christ and to himself as falsely accused.⁹¹ This interpretation reinforced heterosexual marital norms and upheld Protestantism.

Whereas in Timurid Persia, poetry served as the popular art infiltrating society with religious interpretation, in Europe, pictures served this function. The earliest printed illustrations of the story appear in a woodcut of the judgment of the wife before Potiphar in the Nuremberg Chronicle (1493). Lucas van Leyden's 1512 and Heinrich Aldegrever's 1532 engravings depict this scene as well as the seduction, which would later become the common illustration of the story. [Figure 13] Van Leyden litters the floor with symbols of sexual impropriety: a spilled container, scattered slippers, and a fallen hat.⁹² The one image divergent from Luther's interpretation, printed by Sebald Beham in 1526, probably in Nuremberg, was quickly subject to censorship. [Figure 14] By depicting both figures as naked and displaying Joseph's genitals, Beham suggests an interpretation

⁹⁰ Mattox, 2003: 234. ⁹¹ Mattox, 2003: 236–240.

⁹² See Weis, Beyer, and Altcapenberg, 2014.



Figure 13 Lucas van Leyden, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*, engraving, 1512, 20 × 16 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 31.31.31

more sympathetic to the wife, and perhaps to Catholicism as well – as suggested by the humanistic rendering of the nudes.⁹³ Lucas Cranach the elder (1472–1553) dramatized a small, fully clothed version of the scene, commissioned by the first Lutheran theologian Phillip Melanchthon, as the last of the Ten Commandments published on a single chart (*Haustafel*) as part of Luther's *Large Catechism*, published in Wittenberg in 1529.⁹⁴ Borrowing from Catholic iconography to ensure its legibility to laypeople, the illustration served as a mnemonic device for chastity as a central tenet of Lutheran faith.

Although the common treatment of the scene coincided with the climactic moment emphasized in some Islamic manuscript paintings, such as

⁹³ Stewart, 2012. Some versions of this print have been altered so that the genitals are erased. Compare Staatliche Kunstsammlung Dresden Inv. A 1920–67 with A2707, both from 1544; Beyer, 2014: 17.

⁹⁴ Beyer, 2014: 18–19.



Figure 14 Sebald Beham, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*, print, 1544. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, Inv. 424-4

that by Bihzad, European interpretations differ considerably.⁹⁵ Rather than conceiving the lovers as engaged in a mutual transcendence of the material/bodily in favor of the divine, it pits female seduction against male chastity. The reduction of narrative space to a European bedroom enhances the prurient yet prudish pleasure of the denuded female contrasted with the clothed male.

During the same era, the scene entered Catholic decorative programs when Raphael (1483–1520) included it among the biblical scenes depicted at the Vatican Loggia. The Bolognese printmaker Marcantoino Raimondi (1480–1534) made a print based on Raphael's design. [Figure 15] Eroticizing the scene by covering the wife's nudity with a gauzy shift, he augmented its transgression by adding an idol behind Joseph. His student Properzia de Rossi (1490–1530) further popularized the scene in one of the relief panels commissioned for the façade of San Petronio in Bologna in 1525–1526.⁹⁶

Depictions receded until 1610, when Ludovico Cigoli (1559–1613) revived the theme. The same year, Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1653), daughter of Cigoli's close colleague Orazio Gentileschi (1563–1639), completed her scandalous *Susanna and the Elders*. Through it, she articulated her position as a female artist vulnerable to the exploitation of older men.⁹⁷ The naturalistic nudity of the female figure displays the figure's vulnerability to the lecherous old men who discuss her, ignoring her gestures of protest. It implicates the (male) viewer in their transgression. Conversely, Cigoli's treatment of *Joseph* inverts the power dynamic of rape by asserting the treachery of women as seductive calumnious adulteresses. [Figure 16] He emphasizes the wife's lechery through the loosened red garter and fallen stocking revealing her leg, as well as traditional signs such as the fallen slipper, indicating lost chastity, on the floor before the raised and canopied bed. This contrasts with the dog, signifying loyalty, hidden under Joseph's side of the bed. The baroque levity of the scene doubly flatters the viewer who, identifying with Joseph, simultaneously imagines himself as sexually irresistible and morally chaste. In contrast with Artemisia's *Susanna*, where sexuality is predicated on power, Cigoli's *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife* offers amusement.

⁹⁵ The lack of circulation of Bihzad's painting reduces the possibility of influence East to West; the late date of these early images reduce the possibility of Bihzad having seen early engravings through missionaries, although this is possible.

⁹⁶ In the collection of the Museo S. Petronio, Bologna.

⁹⁷ Cropper, 2001: 276. The painting is in the collection of Schloss Weissenstein, Pommersfelden.

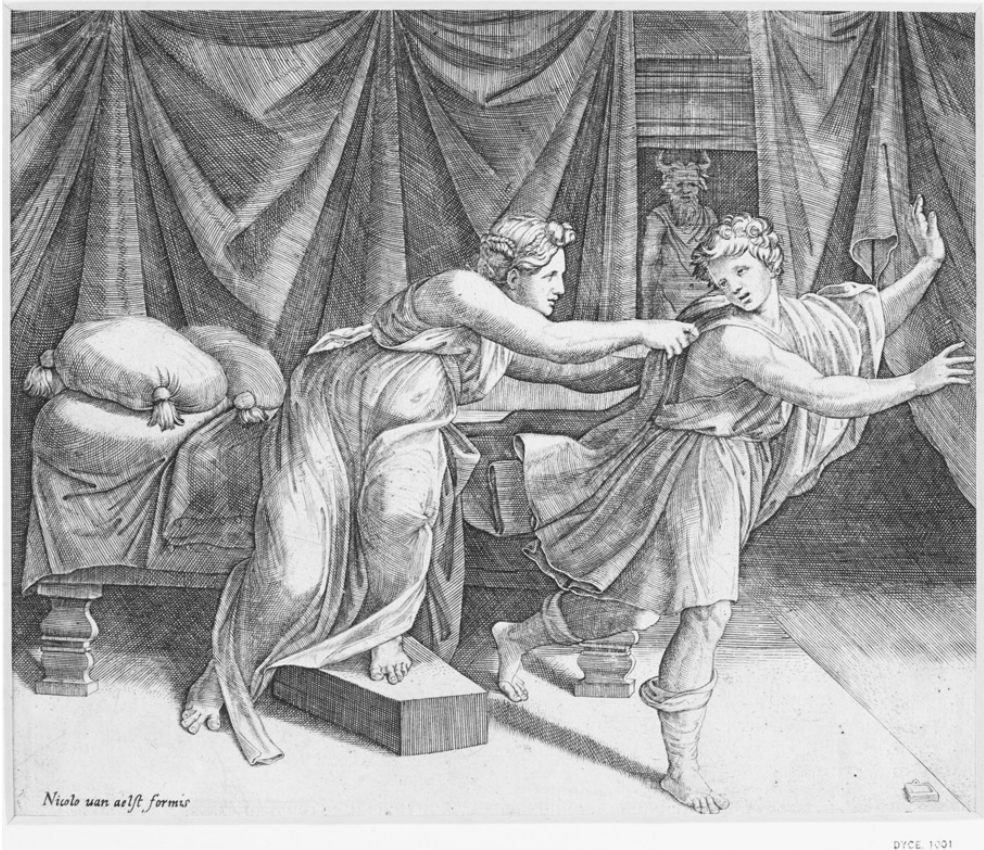


Figure 15 Marcantonio Raimondi, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*, print, c.1490–1534. Victoria and Albert Museum, DYCE.1001. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Sex was no game for women, charged with maintaining family honor. Although Artemisia would later marry and become the first woman in the Academy in 1614, her early life was marked by a trial at which a student of her father's was accused of raping (or deflowering) her and she had to attest to her chastity under torture.⁹⁸ The frequent selection of Joseph and Potiphar's wife as a theme by artists around Artemisia suggests that they may have used the scene as commentary on the real-life conflict behind the trial. Guido Reni (1575–1642), working with Cigoli and Orazio Gentileschi at the Scipione Borghese, depicted the scene in 1630 and 1631.⁹⁹ [Figure 17] In contrast to Cigoli's version, Reni's earlier version depicts both figures as sad, almost frightened, as the partly nude wife looks with disappointment at

⁹⁸ Cavazzini, 2001: 282–295. ⁹⁹ Christiansen, 2001: 2.



Figure 16 Ludovico Cigoli, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*, 1610. Forbidden to make reproductions with any tool. © Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo – Galleria Borghese



Figure 17 Guido Reni, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*, oil on canvas, c.1630. The J. Paul Getty Museum, 93.PA.57

the young man who backs away from her. His second depiction of the scene (today at the Pushkin Museum) appears even more somber, with both figures fully dressed and the betrayed woman looking at a man who shamefully lowers his gaze. Paolo Finoglia (1590–1645), a colleague of Artemisia for commissions in Naples and Madrid, dramatized the scene in deep chiaroscuro, suggesting less a seduction than a negotiation between a disheveled, self-righteous woman and a man reluctantly leaving her. [Figure 18] Orazio depicted the subject within a biblical series he painted for Henrietta Maria in the Italianate Queen's House at Greenwich in 1630–1632.¹⁰⁰ [Figure 19] His rejection of Baroque dramaticism may indicate subtle commentary on Artemisia's trial.¹⁰¹ The partially nude woman, wrapped in a blanket, reclines on the bed, holding Joseph's mantle in her hand. He jauntily walks away, parting a suggestive red curtain. The lack of dynamism in the scene transforms the woman's seduction into her silence. Despite her interest in depicting biblical women, Artemisia only attempted the theme near the end of her life, indicated by a 1651 report of a half-finished painting in her studio. Perhaps it hit too close to home.

¹⁰⁰ www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/405477/joseph-and-potiphars-wife

¹⁰¹ Christiansen, 2001: 34.



Figure 18 Paolo Finoglia, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*, oil on canvas, 232.7 × 193.7 cm, c.1640. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Samuel H. Kress Foundation, 1962.163. Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College

Unlike Islamic poetry or Protestant engravings, the paintings no longer gloss theology. Rather than casting the wife as evil and Joseph as blameless, as in the exegetical interpretation, or recasting the affair in terms of divine love as in Judeo-Islamic interpretations, the interaction between the two characters dramatizes the complexities of a human relationship external to its theological origins. The eyes of man and woman meet with expressions of longing, accusation, apology, and shame. Each rendition presents two parties involved in a complex negotiation that ends in betrayal more clearly



Figure 19 Orazio Gentileschi, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*, oil on canvas, 1630–1632. Royal Collection Trust, CIN 405477. © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2018

than seduction. The woman expected one deal, but got another. The mute language of the visual allows multivalence, folding a contemporary interpretation within a biblical guise.

Like seventeenth-century European paintings, Jami's poem functions mimetically through psychological assimilation, enabling identification between the reader and the characters through the intimate metaphor of erotic desire. His deployment of poetry as exegesis reflects Quranic concerns distinguishing between disbelieving poets who distract from divine truth and believers who do good deeds with it (Q26:221–227). Such an understanding fits within Platonic concerns over the danger of poetry, as expressed by Proclus:

All poetry is mimetic, and poetic mimesis can be defective in one of two ways: either by presenting its subjects without likeness or similarity or, while achieving such likeness, presenting a shifting diversity of character or behavior that, by means of psychological assimilation (the effect of mimesis), will produce comparable characteristics in the audience.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Halliwell, 2002: 325 (412–425).

Dramatically popularizing theological sources, Jami produces precisely the type of good 'falsehood' or 'fiction' about the gods that Proclus (in the tradition of Plato) praises. Poetry serves as the primary interpretive realm.

Bihzad's painting resists similar identification. By choosing the scene immediately after the seduction and representing the transcendent escape from the palace of materiality, it transforms the figures imbued with life in Jami's poem back into the non-mimetic figures of prophetic discourse, as in Sa'di's emotionally disengaged poem that the painting illustrates. The inset lines of Jami's poem within the painting suggest an intellectual assimilation of Jami's mimetic act rather than the creation of independent visual interpretation. Whereas Jami and European paintings interpret the story through emotional identification with the protagonists, Bihzad's painting does not. Poetry provides a closer analogy for the mimetic effect of European painting.

Instead, Bihzad's painting represents the transcendent subject following the Sufi ideal of self-annihilation in the divine. Derin Terzioğlu summarizes this attitude by quoting the visionary Sufi tradition of the mystic Junayd (d. 910), who says: "Sufism means that God makes you die to yourself and makes you alive in Him." Similarly, al-Hallaj says:

It is I that torments me
In grace to me, take this 'I' from between us!¹⁰³

Intertwining text, manuscript illumination, tile revetment, interior and exterior architecture, and dramatic human action, the painting disorients by refusing to position the viewer in relation to the characters. Rather than depicting sexual and idolatrous temptation, it depicts escape from the space of temptation. If we read Jami's poem as a meditation on the function of the image through the threat of the idol, then Bihzad's visual interpretation affirms that the idol is not the only threat to monotheism. Rather, it presents a microcosm of a larger threat, contained in the palace but constituted by desire. The idol is neither the figure of the god who must be hidden, nor sexuality, nor the wealth of the palace, but a network of desires potentially constituting *shirk*.

Bihzad's painting escapes from this worldly trap of material idols. In the poem, Yusuf keeps trying to avert his gaze as representation after representation depicts his lust, producing a spatial vertigo which he is unable to escape except in his ultimate recourse to God. In contrast, the painting offers no idols. Instead, flat layers of pattern, angled in patches that direct

¹⁰³ Terzioğlu, 2002: 139.

the gaze upward across the page, deflect the viewer's gaze. In contrast to the European paintings, which direct the attention of the viewer to the central figures, here the center is marked by the mihrab, underscored by semi-perspectival sightlines. Yet the mihrab, always pointing elsewhere, is both a focal point and an absence. Analogously, the figures above escape the trap of materiality. Like Yusuf, viewers find their subjectivity decentered by the image – unlike in a European painting, we do not know at first where to look. The image continually deflects the desire of our gaze, returning us the text.

Finally, although these European paintings take up a religious subject, they engage it in a worldly way. If there is an exhortative voice in the paintings, it concerns the rules of physical sexual behavior in light of scripture, whether interpreted through the Lutheran framework or used as a narrative through which to meditate on contemporary society. Conversely, Bihzad's painting looks contemporary – the palace and figures are imagined through conventions common to their era, and reflecting the artist's environment – but, like the poems with which it is intertwined, never disengages from its interpretive lineage. Unless floating through a palace can be considered useful advice, its interpretation bears less on our everyday behavior than on how to meditate on the divine through our most intimate passions. Like the poems, it says nothing about the rules of everyday behavior, but everything about how to experience the realms of creation through the heart. This discursive space in which it participates is what constructs the Islamic, not simply as a practice of worship, or a relationship with a scriptural tradition, but as perennial conversation between multiple voices.

European painting distinguishes itself from textual interpretation; when illustrating stories (as opposed to independent drawings in albums) manuscript painting often enters into an interpretive conversation with text. The European art-historical tradition expects demonstrative prose to provide authoritative interpretive commentary on artworks, including poems. In contrast, Islamic poetry and manuscript painting participates in a trans-medial interpretive network not independent from artistic form. For this reason, a synopsis of a European story illustrated in a painting provides information about where the symbolism comes from, but often the painting represents beyond the purported text, as in the paintings of Joseph and Potiphar's wife surrounding Artemisia. Yet a synopsis of the story illustrated in a manuscript painting cannot trace the intellectual discussions in which paintings often play a complex role.

Whereas Islamic painting often engages in an analytical discourse alongside poetry, European painting often comments independently on the

world. It allows the viewer, like the essayist, to look at the world from a distance and take in an overview. As the viewer gazes from the proper position central to the picture plane, he or she gains perspectival mastery over the painting as a window onto the world before him, even if it is a private bedroom. The geometry of Bihzad's painting denies such propriety to the gaze and thereby does not implicate a human subject as its master. To enter such an image, the viewer must also always exit it, never lingering too long in the realm of form, but simply pausing along its passageway to meaning.

Probably no form is more readily associated with Islamic art than the intertwined polyhedral isometric (evenly spaced) geometry embellishing diverse objects, from the intricate mother-of-pearl inlay on a backgammon board to the colorful tilework of Central Asian tombs. Such geometries have been commonplace from Spain to India, Central Asia to Africa from approximately the eleventh century into the modern era; they remain ubiquitous today as the signal of Islamicity, whether in the design of the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto or at Rabat Airport. While the media and decorative treatment of geometric pattern changed across time and place, it has remained a central element in Islamic arts and architecture for approximately a millennium. But what is geometry, and how does it express meaning? Is it simply a signal of Islamic hegemony? Does it come from habit? Is it religiously Islamic? Is geometry a mimetic practice?

Without directly decoding the symbolism of geometry, Islamic discourses suggest an implicit understanding of geometry as an agent of meaning without a semiotic structure of signifier and signified. Geometry does not re-present; it presents. As such, its religious significance has everything to do with perception and little to do with intention. In putting forth its own quiddity, geometry induces the subject to infinitely reaffirm his or her own transience. This infinitely shifting subjectivity both enacts and contrasts the doctrinal absoluteness of God, the one constant of diversity that constitutes Islam.¹

Despite its visual ubiquity, this geometric agency has been largely absent from histories of Islamic art.² Unlike in the Christian tradition, where the symbolism of cruciform geometry is articulated through both iconographic images and ritual (such as the cruciform gesture over the body), the symbolism of Islamic geometry is articulated neither in theological texts nor in everyday practice. Unlike the post-Renaissance European tradition of perspective, there is no theorization of the geometric structure as a mimetic device. The absence of such discourses has left Islamic art historians tentative in attributing meaning to geometry. This leaves

vocabulary, such as ‘arabesque,’ ‘ornament,’ and ‘decoration,’ which identify it through European premises. The outmoded and imprecise term ‘arabesque,’ in use by the eighteenth century, implies an essentialized ethnic visual culture, exoticizing the inheritance of forms present in pre-Islamic late antique culture.³ Applied to surface geometries in Owen Jones 1851 *Grammar of Ornament*, the term ‘ornament’ was defined by Oleg Grabar in 1983 as “any decoration that has no referent outside of the object on which it was found, except in technical manuals.” He distinguishes this from ‘decoration,’ defined as “anything applied to a structure or an object that is not necessary to the stability, use, or understanding of that structure or object.”⁴ Both terms presume a system of outward mimesis in which meaning and agency are external to form. But, as Graves points out, separating surface treatment from associated forms misconstrues the structure of geometric practices: “The medieval artistic modes collectively and commonly termed ‘ornament’ make up a fully three-dimensional system in which surface and space are mutually constitutive, rather than a two-dimensional skin that can be unproblematically separated from its carriers.”⁵ ‘Ornament’ can signal Islamicity but cannot engage in mimesis; geometry can.

In *The Topkapı Scroll* (1995, Necipoğlu adds the Persian term *giriḥ*, meaning ‘knot,’ to the lexicon.⁶ This closely corresponds to the Arabic term ‘*aqd*, meaning repeat unit or pattern.’⁷ The term *giriḥ* appears as early as 1557, when Qutb al-Din Qissakhvan identified it among several non-figural styles of painting, including the Chinese (*khata’i*), the European (*firingi*), relating to margins (*fassali*), and marbled (*abri*).⁸ The historical longevity and geographical specificity of the term underscores its importance, but, as with decoration and ornament, seems to limit its meaning to a habitual visual practice undertaken by craftsmen rather than one consciously conveying philosophical or doctrinal meaning.

This chapter examines the meanings accorded to geometry in both modern academic and premodern Islamic discourses. The first section examines the discomfort with geometry expressed by some founding practitioners of Islamic art history. While their prejudices may no longer dominate, their judgment of isometric geometry as non-signifying persists. The subsequent section disputes the presumed absence of Islamic discourses about geometry revealing its meanings not simply as a cultural sign, but as a mimetic practice.

³ Allen, 1988a: 2. ⁴ Grabar, 1992: xxii–xxiii. ⁵ Graves, 2018: 59–60.

⁶ Necipoğlu, 1995: 22. ⁷ Necipoğlu, 2017a: 37. ⁸ Porter, 2000: 113.

9.1 Pattern as Pathology

Despite geometry's ubiquity, Islamic art historians have rarely considered it as productive of meaning. They have conceived of mimesis solely in terms of representational images and iconography. In 1949 Ernst Kühnel (1882–1964) underscored the “obviously decorative intention” of isometric geometries, in which “the eye of the viewer is not arrested by the pleasant detail, but ... by the kaleidoscopic passing of an ever-changing and disappearing harmony of unreal forms ... decisive is a decorative intent which is devoid of a meaningful purpose.”⁹ As late as 1979, Ettinghausen deployed the term *horror vacui* to describe surface pattern.

Our task will be to trace the principal methods by which the artisans handled the extensive combinations of patterns so as to avoid bare areas which, it seems, were aesthetically unsatisfactory. In this manner they managed to overcome in a pleasant fashion the *horror vacui* and yet did not create the impression of being overcrowded when many designs were used ... There remains one final question to be asked: Why were Islamic artists obsessed by the *horror vacui*? Historical or literary sources from the Muslim world can hardly be expected to give an answer, as this civilization never developed a critical system of artistic evaluation and there are only occasional references to or descriptions of buildings and objects.¹⁰

Attributed to Aristotelian philosophy and appearing in the Middle Ages, the term *horror vacui* asserts that ‘nature abhors a void.’ It entered art-historical terminology in the nineteenth century, pathologizing pattern as inimical to the austerity preferred through the secularization of negative Protestant appraisals of Catholicism.¹¹ Critiques of superfluity became central to modernist aesthetics, informing Adolph Loos’ 1908 influential essay “Ornament and Crime.” Loos associated ornament with femininity and with the supposed excess of beards (such as those of Jews, expected to demonstrate their modernity by shaving).¹² Religious critique became secularized by incorporating an aesthetic critique of ethnicity. Although writing much later, Ettinghausen’s designation of Islamic artists as “obsessed” with filling space similarly attributes an entire visual culture with an irrational, potentially pathological cause.

His reluctance to impute meaning to geometry was shared by his student Oleg Grabar. His *Mediation of Ornament* begins with a discussion of a carving that may or not represent a bird and a formal comparison between a fifteenth-century calligraphic panel from Iran and Piet Mondrian’s

⁹ Necipoğlu, 1995: 75. ¹⁰ Ettinghausen, 1979: 15. ¹¹ Berryman, 1997.

¹² Cernuschi, 2006.

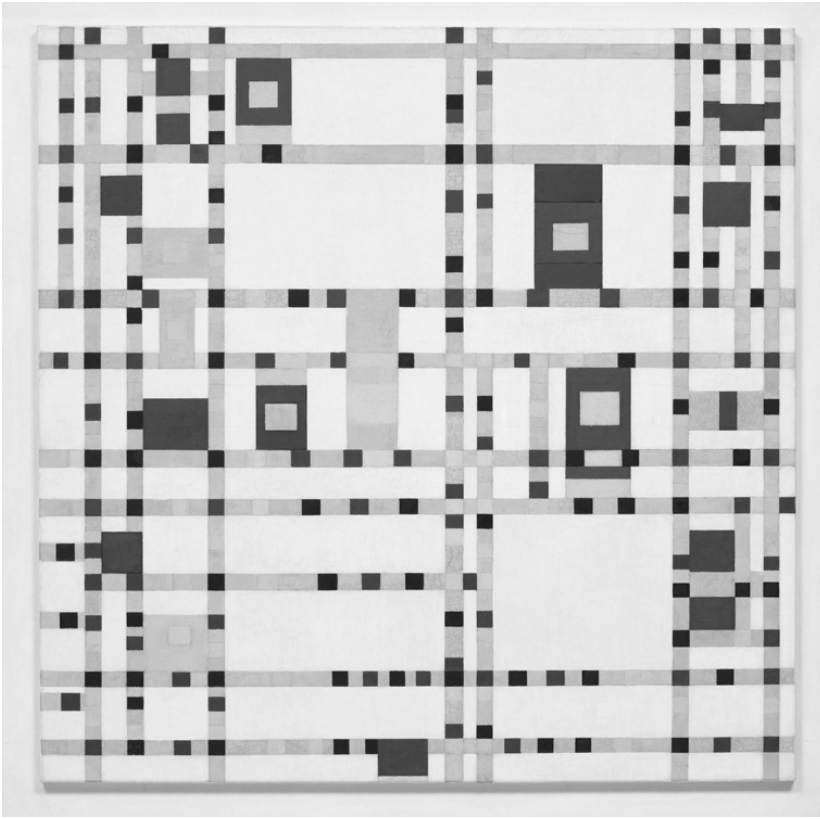


Figure 20 Piet Mondrian, *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, 1942–1943, oil on canvas, 127 × 127 cm. Anonymous donation, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 73.1943. DIGITAL IMAGE © 2019 Museum of Modern Art/Scala, Florence

Broadway Boogie Woogie (1942–1943).¹³ [Plate 16, Figure 20] He snagged this comparison from *Das Bild in Islam* (1971) by Turkish art historian Mazhar Şevket İpşiroğlu, who used the formal similarities of the work to suggest Islamic aesthetics as a forerunner to modernist abstraction.¹⁴ For Grabar, the apparent similarity suggests a universal human subject. Bryson describes such an apparently “natural” attitude as follows:

The less that culture (academism) intervenes, the more lifelike the image: remove ‘projection’ from the world, and the world will reveal its luminous essence. At the end of the process of falsification, an image will be produced that will contain no false information: what is not false must be true; and true universally, since the false accretion of culture will have been discarded. Reduced to a rudimentary cognitive

¹³ Grabar, 1992: 18. ¹⁴ İpşiroğlu, 1971: 171.

apparatus, both viewer and painter are abstracted from the practical and public sphere where alone the codes of recognition operate, to become in the end disembodied retinal reflectors.¹⁵

Along similar lines, Grabar finds that the similarity of the works attests to a transcendent language of aesthetic pleasure that competes with the meaning of the calligraphic text. He designates the work, a meditation on the name ‘Ali, as “iconophoric”: “an exact and nonnegotiable relationship to an external referent whose expression is not, however, restricted to this particular object.”¹⁶ The object is thus a container of meaning, but also an abstraction subject to universal apprehension.

Shifting earlier formalist approaches to ‘Islamic abstraction’ through psychoanalytic vocabulary rooted in European mimeticism as developed by Rudolf Arnheim and Ernst Gombrich, Grabar reduces the potential interpretive framework for a premodern Muslim subject to that of being able to literally read the calligraphy in the painting or see the bird in the relief carving.¹⁷ Presuming the universality of his interpretive categories, he assumes that the binary distinction he makes between “iconophoricity” (representationalism) and “formalism” (the abstraction of forms) encompasses all culturally coded aesthetic experiences. He thus elides the possibility that meaning might emerge not despite but because of visual ambiguity: meaning might inhere to the impossibility to define or limit the possibilities afforded by sense. By asserting a universal humanism, he forces the Other to necessarily always already be the same as the rational universal modern subject that the art historian supposedly represents.

This betrays not only a lack of interest in the relationship between Islamic intellectual history and artistic practices, but a broader prejudice characterizing artmaking as a non-verbal, non-intellectual, apolitical endeavor. It conforms to Riegl’s attempt to make art history into a science in which physical form functions independently from living culture. Elevating art over craft through the myth of individual genius, this framework denigrates both in reducing the artist and the craftsperson alike to inspired figures segregated from their intellectual milieus. It ignores the contextual engagement of both Mondrian and the anonymous artist of the Persian calligraphic panel.

The works do not look similar because of some mysterious transcultural beauty, but because they reflect shared intellectual premises that root abstraction in the mathematics of the Fibonacci series. For Mondrian,

¹⁵ Bryson, 1983: 45. ¹⁶ Grabar, 1992: 18. ¹⁷ Shalem and Troelenberg: 2010.

this was expressed through the abstraction of trees; for Islamic artists, through understanding geometry as a microcosmic rendition of the cosmos.¹⁸ Both systems convey intellectual meaning not through superficial resemblance, but through structural verisimilitude. In opposing European naturalism, Mondrian proposed a different system of representation that ended up – for reasons less arbitrary than one might imagine – reframing those of the Islamic tradition.

The implicit preference for surface over structural verisimilitude in the natural attitude of the Western tradition prefers explicit over implicit meaning. Grabar thus explains:

A positive cultural explanation of geometry ... argues that geometry is the visual expression of a set of truths that dominated the traditional life of the Muslims until the appearance of contemporary disruptions. Thus astrological configurations, magical squares, cosmological considerations, and the central Muslim notion of Unity (*tawhid*) are all seen as numerical ideas for which a geometric formulation is not only possible, but even desirable. Many arguments of logic and fact exist against this immediate interpretation of geometry, however appealing it is to a curious mixture of Western orientalists and Islamic fundamentalists. The most important objections are several. There does not exist, to my knowledge, a single instance justifying the view that the Muslim community, the *ummah*, as opposed to individual thinkers, understood mathematical forms as symbolizing or illustrating a Muslim cosmology. Furthermore, we have no information to the effect that viewers of complex designs on walls, ceilings, or floors interpreted them in the abstract and schematic formulas of the orderly sketches needed by the artists or artisans to make their designs. Finally, although it has been shown that at least contemporary artisans are well aware of the complex technology of their designs, I do not know of many instances of a spectator or viewer being equally informed.¹⁹

Grabar's devaluation of "individual thinkers" as outliers to a single defining truth suggests a static understanding of Islam, defined eternally through doctrine. Yet knowledge is not always explicit, or even public. For example, in the Ottoman Empire, geometric patterns circulated as guild secrets associated with Sufi brotherhoods, where technical and spiritual knowledge often required years of apprenticeship.²⁰ 'Individual thinkers' are not exceptional; their overlapping discourses reflect widespread recognition of geometry as perpetuating meaning. The difference between a cohesive Western discourse of perspectivalism and one concerning Islamic geometry is not the presence or absence of information, but the theorization that recognizes relationships between individual thinkers as a discourse.

¹⁸ Blotkamp, 2001: 100–101. ¹⁹ Grabar, 1992: 51. ²⁰ Necipoğlu, 1995: 353.

9.2 Isometric Geometry in Islamic Perceptual Culture

Whereas the isometric polyhedral geometry today associated with Islamic cultures developed in approximately the tenth century, earlier Islamic arts and architecture employed the golden ratio, valorized since antiquity. A proportion frequent in nature and based on the irrational number (ϕ), 1.6180339 ..., the golden ratio was extolled as epitomizing harmonious beauty from Pythagoras to Plato and constructed mathematically in Euclid's *Elements*. It embodies a pre-arithmetical geometry practiced by Roman craftsmen and discussed by the first-century BCE architect and engineer Vitruvius.²¹ This understanding of beauty reentered Christian Europe with the twelfth-century reintroduction of Greek philosophy and science from Arabic translations. It underlies ideal human and architectural proportions established in the Italian Renaissance and hailed as characterizing Western civilization.

The first monument of Islam, the Dome of the Rock (691) took a rotundal form reminiscent of both a Christian *martyrium* and an Arab memorial structure. It was revetted with gold-and-glass mosaic, a medium inherited from elite Roman and Sasanian forms coupled with innovatively monumental architectural Quranic inscriptions.²² Like the Rotunda at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher (c.335), the proportions of the Dome of the Rock conformed to the golden ratio.²³ The proportional similarities of these buildings, spatially close but temporally distant, suggest shared aesthetic foundations.

Associations between mathematics and divinity were expressed in the tenth century, when al-Maqdisi of Balkh likened the necessity of God as planner of the universe to the need for an architect for a building. Likewise, al-Ghazali compared God to the planner, builder, and decorator of the world.²⁴ The use of the golden ratio to determine the page size and the placement of the writing in a ninth-century Quran, one of the first to be clearly designed by a foundation associated with the state, indicates the practical application of such theory. It suggests that the proportions symbolized Platonic associations with cosmic harmony and the divine.²⁵

Geometric patterning, far more complex than that used under the Umayyad dynasty, became widespread around the turn of the eleventh century, particularly under the Abbasid caliphate, ruling from Baghdad, and the Great Seljuq dynasty (1037–1194), whose capitals were in central

²¹ Smith, 1983; Jacobson, 1986. ²² Khoury, 1993; Khazaie, 2005.

²³ Chen, 1979; Chen, 1980. ²⁴ Necipoğlu, 1995: 4. ²⁵ George, 2003.

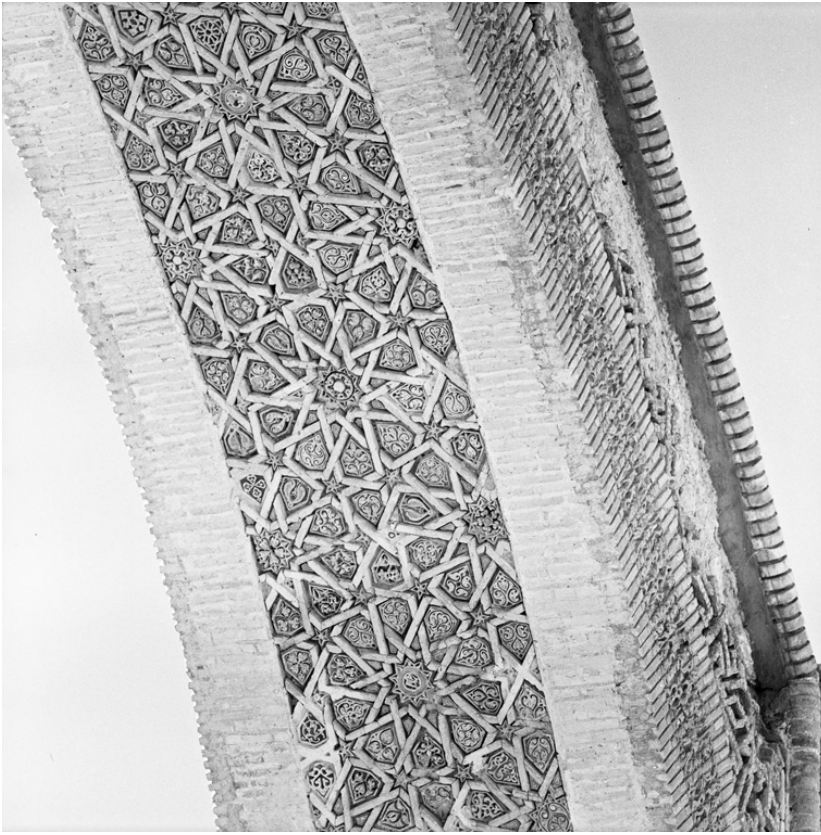


Figure 21 Josephine Powell, “Carved Geometric Decoration (Detail),” photograph, Bust, Afghanistan, 1959–1961. Harvard Fine Arts Library, Powell Number AF45-123. Josephine Powell Photograph, Courtesy of Special Collections, Fine Arts Library, Harvard University

Iran.²⁶ Early examples of polyhedral isometric geometry occur at the ruins at Lashkar-i Bazar in Afghanistan traced to the Ghurid (1170s–1215) dynasty. [Figure 21] Palatial plans resemble tenth-century residences in the elite administrative city of Abbasid Samarra.²⁷ Like Umayyad desert palaces and later Timurid palaces, they also included extensive programs of figurative wall painting and ornate carved surfaces.²⁸ However, spaces that might have harbored the repeating vegetal stuccowork characteristic of earlier monuments from elsewhere in the Islamic world, such as the Mschatta Facade or at the Medinat az-Zahra, are instead covered with repeating polyhedral geometry. Surviving ninth-century painting from

²⁶ Necipoğlu, 2017a: 26, 46. ²⁷ Allen, 1988b: 61. ²⁸ Hoffman, 2008; Lentz, 1993.

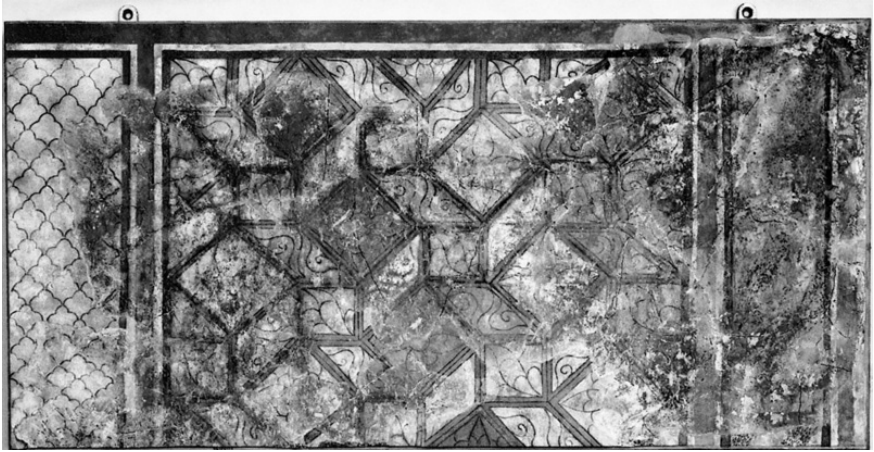


Figure 22 Anonymous, wall painting, stucco, Nishapur, Iran, ninth century. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 40.170.177

Nishapur shows similar, albeit simpler, geometric treatment. [Figure 22] An approximately contemporaneous Quran inscribed by ibn al-Bawwab used polyhedral isometric geometry in its lavishly decorated gold frontispiece. [Figure 23] Seljuq-era funerary architecture in modern Iran and Iraq, such as the Kharraqan Towers (1069) in Ghazvin Province in Iran, quickly adopted isometric polyhedral geometric surface revetment. Such geometry soon projected into a third dimension, allowing for the stalactite form later called *muqarnas* at sites including the Shrine of ‘Abdullah (1085) at Dur in Iraq. Although artisanal manuals recognized three-dimensionality as an extension of the logic of two dimensions, European art historians, accustomed to separating surface treatment from architectural form, puzzled over the origins of *muqarnas*, the three-dimensional geometric form that found a long-lived home over doorways and enlivening squinches.²⁹

An analogous shift from simple to more complex geometries seems to have occurred contemporaneously in music theory. Distinguishing between consecutive and non-consecutive melodic movement, al-Kindi conceives of music in terms of movements described as a spiral, a sash, and a braid – forms likely translated from a Greek source. This informs al-Farabi’s oppositions of straight and circular melodic patterns, picked up by ibn Sina, who defines circularity as “periodic repetition of pitches within a given melodic span.”³⁰ Yet he also enhances al-Kindi’s descriptive

²⁹ Necipoğlu, 1995: 22; Bush, 2018: 49–52. ³⁰ Wright, 2004: 361.

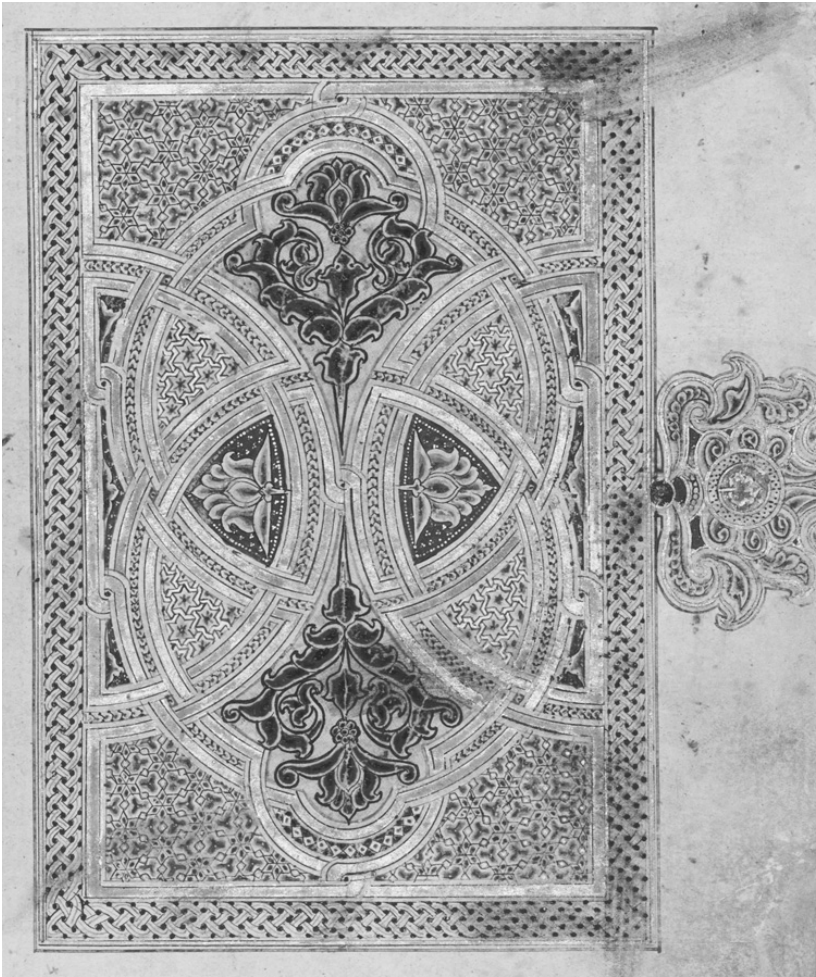


Figure 23 Ibn al-Bawwab, frontispiece, from the Quran, c.1000. Chester Beatty Library, CBL Is 1431, f.284b. © The Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin

geometric vocabulary by adding polygonal and circular polygonal movement. This seems to have informed several later visual representations of musical modes, ranging from the *Kitab al-Adwar* of Safi al-Din Urmawi (d. 1294) to eighteenth-century Ottoman representations of rhythms by Dimitri Cantemir and cosmological associations with modes.³¹ The integration of music with geometry reflected al-Farabi's recognition of both practices among the seven fields of mathematics, including

³¹ Shiloah, 1979: 382.

arithmetic, optics, astronomy, weights, and mechanics. Each field comprised a theoretical and an applied branch.³²

Surviving pattern books reflecting the early development of polyhedral isometric geometry demonstrate the sophistication with which craftsmen learned to execute designs that would become commonplace on the surfaces of objects and architecture. One anonymous Persian-language manuscript dated between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries and entitled “On Interlocking Similar or Congruent Figures” exemplifies how basic geometrical knowledge created systemic pattern.³³ Recognizing the unprecedented sophistication of the work, Necipoğlu describes it not as a unique work of genius so much as a collaborative reflection of the a multi-directional actor network disseminated widely by artisans, copyists, and scholars.³⁴ Illustrations include: a demonstration of how to use a sextant in relation to the stars to determine the *qibla* [Figure 24]; an association of geometry with pragmatic knowledge of building construction and astronomy; geometric exposition of the golden section [Figure 25]; and examples of how to build repeating patterns with a tripartite ruler and a compass, indicated at the top of Figure 26. This also at the bottom of Figure 27, where a compass has been used to designate two points outside of the circle. Repetition of this measurement through repositioning the compass and the ruler, or through repositioning of such diagrams, enables the potentially infinite reproduction of geometric focal points.

The correlation of geometric surface treatment with the incorporation of late antique philosophies into Islamic thought reflects contemporaneous theological debates in Abbasid Baghdad and Fatimid Cairo. The acceptance of the Aristotelian idea, expressed in the *Topics*, that the world could be rationally understood through principles of knowledge derived from observation provided a strong substrate for the incorporation of antique philosophy into Islamic thought in ninth-century Baghdad. Yet for many, this emphasis on the power of human rational thought implied sacrilegious limitation of divine omnipotence. Far from a simple transfer of antique knowledge into Islamic culture through science, these discourses underscored the pragmatic engagement of theology with science. The relationship between proportions and aesthetics is handled explicitly in the Brethren of Purity’s sixth epistle, concerning ratios – first mathematical, then also in relation to music, alphabetical letters, verse, dyes, medicines,

³² Necipoğlu, 2017a: 20; Kheirandish, 2017: 81–83.

³³ “Fi Tadakhul al-Ashkal al-Mutashabiha aw al-Mutawafika,” Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, MS Persan 169; Necipoğlu, 1995: 146–150; Necipoğlu, 2017a.

³⁴ Necipoğlu, 2017a: 57–58.

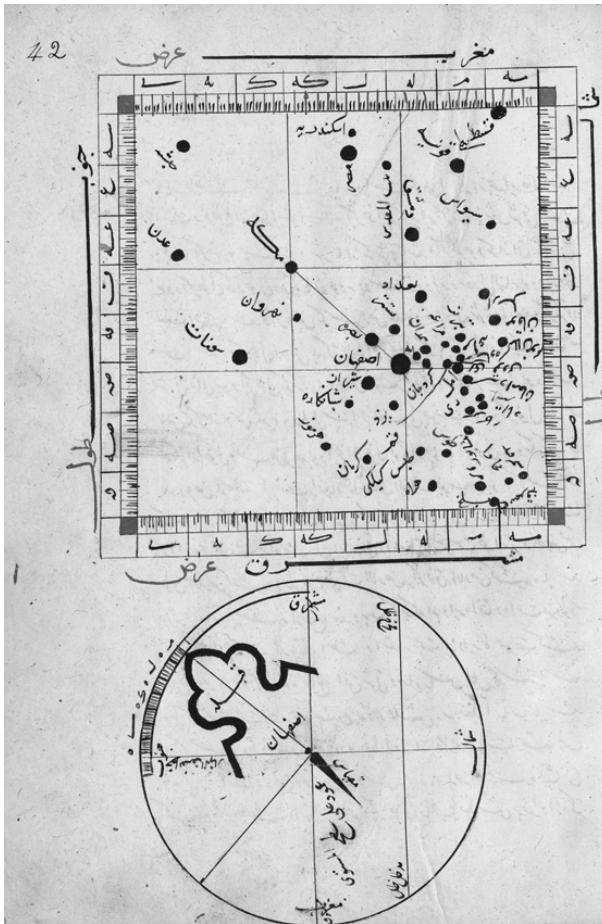


Figure 24 Anonymous, “Demonstration of how to find the Qibla with a sextant in relation to the stars,” from “On Interlocking Similar or Congruent Figures.” Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS Persan 169, p. 42

cooking ingredients, metals, measures and shapes of animals and plants, the humors, the stars, crafted objects, shadows, and celestial spheres.³⁵ This serves to introduce the subsequent epistle, which explains how pragmatic interests, such as in the arts described, have corollaries in spiritual interests. They model this through the metaphor of two kinds of gatherings – one devoted to “corporeal pleasures,” while the other is for “science, wisdom, and spiritual hearing.”³⁶ Thus, as every material endeavor has its spiritual

³⁵ El-Bizri and de Gallatay, 2018: 57–69.

³⁶ El-Bizri and de Gallatay, 2018: 100.

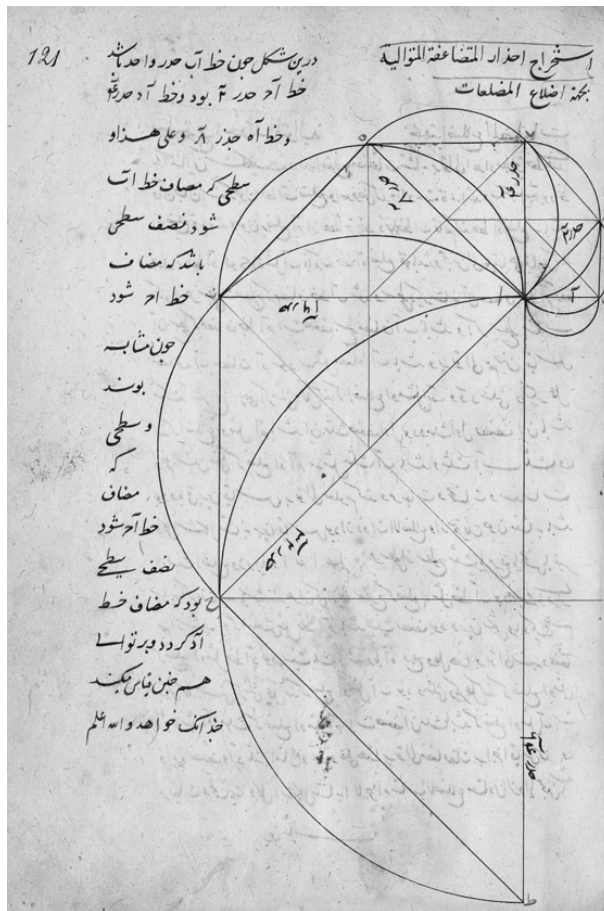


Figure 25 Anonymous, “Example of geometric pattern as constructed with a compass and ruler,” from “On Interlocking Similar or Congruent Figures.” Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, MS Persan 169, pp. 121–122

counterpart, the acquisition of a physical craft has spiritual ramifications and ultimately participates in the creative force of the ‘world soul.’³⁷

The discourses of optics that correlate with the rise of isometric polygonal geometry emerged within debates about broader parameters of truth in the eighth century (see [Chapter 1.1](#)). From author to author, geometry emerges within a system of similitudes, including the cosmos, music, brocade, and architecture, that place it in a system of meaning. While this meaning cannot be interpreted in a consistent semiotic system – an

³⁷ El-Bizri and de Gallatay, 2018: 161.

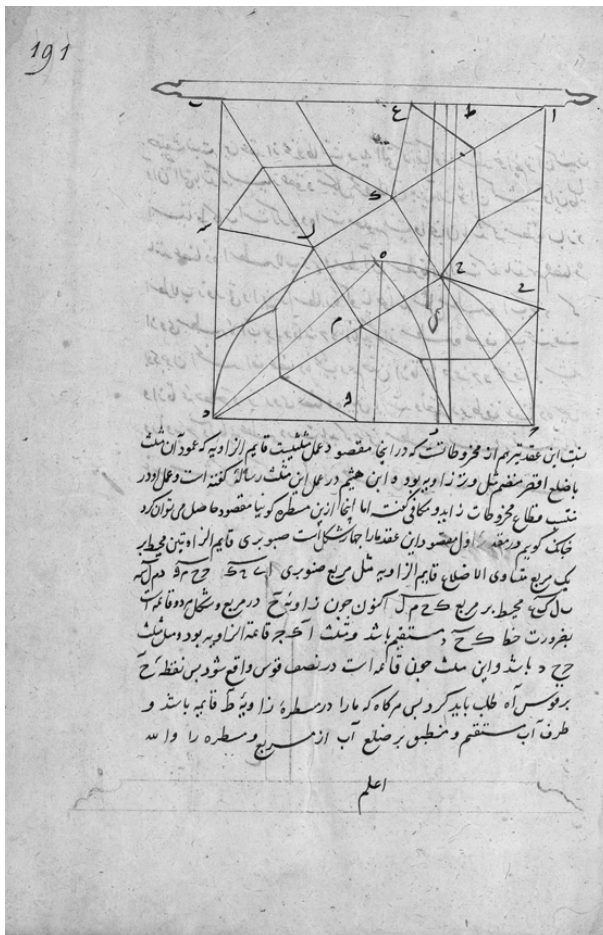


Figure 26 Anonymous, "Example of geometric pattern as constructed with a compass and ruler," from "On Interlocking Similar or Congruent Figures." Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, MS Persan 169, p. 191

octagon, for example, does not necessarily signify a particular meaning distinct from a hexagon, although meaning can be attributed to both – it can signal a mode of apprehending human creativity within parameters enabled by the Divine.

The first Muslim scholar to investigate optics was al-Kindi. He was born the son of a governor of Kufa and grew up in Basra, a stronghold of Mu'tazilite thought. He matured under the patronage of the three caliphs who upheld Mu'tazilite thought, but fell out of favor near the end of his life under a fourth who disputed it. The study of optics held special importance in his philosophy of nature. He explained:

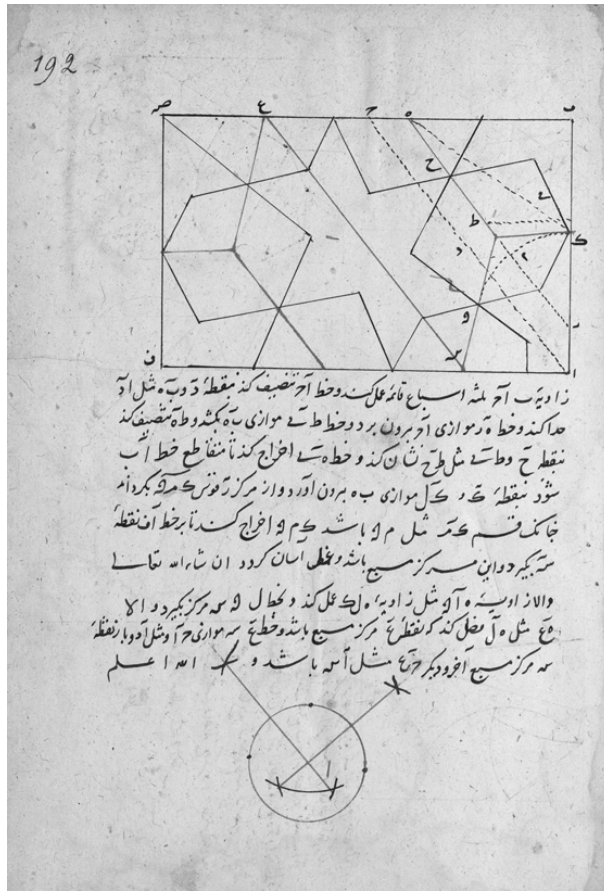


Figure 27 Anonymous, “Example of geometric pattern as constructed with a compass and ruler,” from “On Interlocking Similar or Congruent Figures.” Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, MS Persan 169, p. 192

It is manifest that everything in this world, whether it be substance or accident, produces rays in its own manner like a star ... Everything that has actual existence in the world of the elements emits rays in every direction, which fill the whole world ... this radiation binds the world into a vast network in which everything acts upon everything else to produce natural effects. Stars act upon the terrestrial world; magnets, fire, sound, and colors act on objects in their vicinity. Even words conceived by the mind can radiate power and thus produce effects outside the mind.”³⁸

³⁸ Lindberg, 1976, 19.

Al-Kindi supports Euclid and Ptolemy's theory of visual extramission: that the eye emits rays that fall on objects to sense the rays in succession. Following Galen's anatomical model, al-Kindi suggests that these rays are not material, but that their visual power transforms the ambient air. He discounts the theory of intromission because it contradicts Euclidian mathematics. In asserting mathematics as the model for sensation within the intrinsic and immutable pattern of nature, al-Kindi affirmed Mu'tazilite rationalism. In contrast, ibn Sina argued vehemently against the model of extramission through his observation of how sight functions in mirrors.³⁹

Unlike al-Kindi, the Brethren of Purity underscored the metaphysical utility of geometric knowledge inherited from the Pythagorean tradition through the Latin quadrivium of Boethius (d. 524 CE).⁴⁰ For them, geometry (*handasa*) was a mathematical science that entailed knowing magnitudes and distances (or dimensions). Like al-Farabi, they divided it into two practices: the sensible, of use to artisans; and the intelligible (or conceptual), used to understand the motion of heavenly bodies and the impact of musical harmonies on the corporeal embodied soul as well as the non-corporeal intellect.⁴¹ They held that geometry's dependence on vision made it more readily understood than the mathematical science we know as algebra (*al-jabr*, meaning 'the reunion of broken parts'), recently developed by Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi (780–850), from whose name derives the word 'algorithm.'⁴² Similarly, Abu al-Hasan al-Amiri (d. 922), who worked to reconcile philosophy, Sufism, and Islam at the Buyid court in Khorasan, considered geometry's "sensual prototypes" as easier to understand than arithmetic and pragmatically useful for artisans.⁴³

They considered the imagination as regulating a flow of knowledge from the senses toward abstraction. Things in the world (knowable entities) are apprehended by the sense faculties (sight, sound, taste, etc.). The imaginative faculty accounts for these and relays the information to the imaginary and cognitive faculties that preserve the sensory impressions in memory. The soul relies on these memories and therefore does not need sense data. The imagination thus bridges the practical arts of the sensible world and the theoretical arts of the intelligible world. This cultivates a capacity for abstraction. For them, the apprentice of mathematics is progressively trained to minimize reliance on the senses. The intellect learns to

³⁹ Sinai, 2015: 285. ⁴⁰ El-Bizri, 2012: 2. ⁴¹ El-Bizri, 2012: 44–46, 79–91.

⁴² El-Bizri, 2012: 4. ⁴³ Necipoğlu, 2017a: 20.

hypothetically exit the realm of matter, becoming open to higher forms of knowledge and, ultimately, theology. Following the intellectual, noetic role for geometry that Proclus proposed in his commentary on Euclid's geometry, they saw geometry as permitting the soul to "separate itself from this [corporeal] world in order to join, thanks to its celestial ascension, the world of spirits and eternal life."⁴⁴

While the Brethren did not propose the idea of space as pure abstraction, which emerged in the thought of ibn al-Haytham, they were the first to imagine motion as a means of developing a line from a point moving to another point, and the surface as this line rotating around one of the points.⁴⁵ Following Plato's discussion in *Timaeus* of the triangle as the root of all rectilinear surfaces, they emphasized it as the foundation of polyhedral geometry. However, their demonstrations were mathematically incorrect, and they only tangentially mention Plato's association between the forms and the four elements.⁴⁶

Rather than introducing Platonic metaphysics into Islam, they promote geometry as integral to mortal creativity. They discuss how animals such as bees and spiders make habitation according to their natures – bees produce hexagons, while spiders thread their webs rectilinearly and then stitch their lines curvilinearly. Both model human endeavor. "Some people generate a given art from their own proper talent and intelligence without being preceded by anyone else, whilst most makers acquire their art by way of demonstration and learning under mentors."⁴⁷ These examples link geometric practice to Quranic references to nature. One passage exhorts humanity to follow the example of the bee under the inspiration of God (Q16:68–69). Conversely, another warns humanity to refrain from any protection outside that of God, comparing humanity to "spiders building themselves houses – the spider's is the frailest of houses" (Q29:41).⁴⁸ Approximately concurrently with al-Tabari's restriction of Bukhari's *Hadith* condemning representation to the representation of beings with a soul, the Brethren thus establish an appropriate range for human creativity. Like al-Tabari, they thus recognize innate or learned human creativity as a natural gift of God without ignoring its pride-inducing danger. In various discourses, the Quranic comparison between human and apian inspiration also served as a model for calligraphy and engineering.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Necipoğlu, 1995: 191. ⁴⁵ El-Bizri, 2012: 44 n. 103, 101–103.

⁴⁶ Plato, 2008: 46–52; El-Bizri, 2012: 126. ⁴⁷ El-Bizri, 2012: 131.

⁴⁸ Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 254. ⁴⁹ Berlekamp, 2011: 40.

The Brethren then describe the role of apprenticeship in geometric arts, particularly surveying. Although they first enumerate the measurements of their era, their discussion focuses less on what they call the applied practical arts than on the role of practice as a gateway to the substance of the soul. They imagine the geometric adept following a clear path of release from material concerns, regardless of intention or belief, and without any external referent. The geometry itself opens the practitioner greater wisdom.

Know that numerous geometers and scientists believe that dimensions, like length, width, and breadth, have an existence in themselves and by their own constitution

...

If they were to be informed that the ultimate aim of studying the propaedeutic sciences is training the apprentices' minds to receive the forms of the sensible entities through the sensory faculties, and to imagine their forms as they are in themselves through the faculty of ratiocination. If the sensible entities were to be concealed from being perceivable through the senses, then the images [*al-rusum*] formed of them, which have been transmitted from the sensory faculties to the faculty of imagination [*al-quwwa al-mutakhayyila*], and from the faculty of imagination to the faculty of ratiocination would persist. The faculty of ratiocination then transmits [these forms] to the faculty of memory [*al-quwwa al-hafiza*] in such a way that they are visualized [*musawwara*] in the essence of the soul.

The Brethren thus promote geometry as a secret agent converting pragmatists into spiritualists through a natural and inevitable psychological process:

In consequence, the soul abandons the use of the sensory faculties in grasping data when being self-reflective, since it finds all the forms of the sense data in its own essence. It [the soul] is therefore in no need of the body [*al-jasad*], and is ascetic while dwelling in the world with it. It is alert to the slumber of inattentiveness [*nawm al-ghafla*] and wakeful in the slothfulness of ignorance [*raqdat al-jahala*]. [The soul] rises up by its own potency and is autonomous by itself. It departs from the body and exits the ocean of matter, and is saved from being captivated by nature. It is freed from slavishness to its bodily desires, and it is delivered from the pain of missing its corporeal pleasures. It is elevated higher as He said: *Good words rise up to Him and He lifts up the righteous deed* [Q35:10]. He meant by it the 'chastened soul' that is recompensed with the finest of rewards. This is the ultimate aim behind the studying of the propaedeutic sciences that the sons of the philosophers and the pupils of the ancients graduated from. This is the credo of our righteous and esteemed brethren.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ El-Bizri, 2012: 144.

Associating these words with the elevation promised in the Quran, they transform pragmatic knowledge acquired from the ancients into a means of ensuring the education of the true Muslim soul. Explicit in the treatise's conclusion, this unconscious infusion of knowledge extends from geometry and music to knowledge of the heavenly spheres and ultimately of God.

Know, O brother, that the study of sensible geometry aids skillfulness in the arts, whilst the study of intellective geometry and the knowledge of the properties of numbers and figures help in grasping the manner by which the heavenly bodies affect the lower natural entities, and also in understanding how the sounds of music affect the souls of the listeners. Studying the manner by which these two types influence their effects is a prerequisite to knowing the way by virtue of which the separate [i.e. incorporeal] souls impact the embodied souls in the realm of generation and corruption. Those who study intellective geometry have a way to reach knowledge of it through God's aid and guidance.⁵¹

Geometry could describe the movement of music because of the shared mathematical principles underlying both. Both music and geometry insinuate themselves into the perceiver through this inherent structure, one inextricably representing the other. For them, harmonies relied on the employment of several 'virtuous ratios' which transcended specific media, applying as well to music, speech, or form as to the soul. These geometries take different forms for different senses: whereas they recognize visual perception as depending on straight lines, they understand aural perception as taking place through circular ones that inform systems of poetic-musical notation. Akkach rightly warns that, "while major premodern Arabic sources provide detailed exposition of the close correspondence between prosodic circles and musical cycles, the correspondence of these to the geometric patterns and spatial structures of Islamic architecture remain speculative and conjectural."⁵² Alternatively, this disparity may reflect cultural emphasis: while our modern oculocentrism leads us to imagine geometry visually and consider sound analogously, the extensive discussion of the geometry of sound in poetics and music allows for visual geometry to function supplementarily.

The epistles of the Brethren of Purity circulated widely among intellectuals as well as artisans, perhaps informing the use of geometric surface treatment inculcating perception of God. Geometry demonstrates the agency of God without taking recourse to the semiotic distinction between signifier and signified. Whereas outwardly mimetic representation of the divine presumes

⁵¹ El-Bizri, 2012: 159. ⁵² Akkach, 2018: 181.

God as always elsewhere from the perceiving subject, inward mimesis enables geometry to make God present in the perceiving soul.

The replacement of visual theories of extramission with those of intromission developed by ibn al-Haytham increased the scientific basis for understanding perception as apprehending and processing the world from the glancing toward the contemplative gaze. As with the Brethren, the sectarian implications of ibn al-Haytham's thought are unclear. Like al-Kindi, ibn al-Haytham grew up in Basra, indicating Sunni roots with strong ties to Mu'tazilite experimentalism absorbed by Ash'ari thought. But he worked in Fatimid Cairo at a time when the Abbasid ruler al-Qadir in Baghdad had recently underscored the Sunni rejection of the Isma'ili esotericism of the Fatimids. Theologically, ibn al-Haytham's emphasis on imagination as the locus of form could correspond to multiple positions. His deep interest in experimentalism, particularly his concern with using evidence to explain the errors in vision, reflects a Mu'tazilite perspective. Yet the distinction he subsequently makes between the apparent form of things and their formulation as real entities through the imagination suggests Platonic ideas deeply integrated in Isma'ili thought.⁵³ His emphasis on the temporal nature of sight also corresponds with the occasionalism of Ash'ari theology, asserting that no accidental state of matter persists more than one instant and that any continual state is perpetually renewed through the will of God. While the diverse geography of early uses of muqarnas attests to an association with Ash'arism, Tabbaa suggests that this association quickly dissipated.⁵⁴ Yet meaning may persist.

Many literary texts using transmedial metaphors based on visual and musical pattern reflect the perpetual fungibility of media. Al-Farabi describes the development of music from its basic harmony to its full embellishment through transmedial comparisons with the work of an artist who sketches, organizes, and then completes it by adding its colors; the warp and weft of fabric; and the bricks of buildings.⁵⁵ An eleventh-century writer, al-Hasan al-Katib, elaborates on the idea, comparing the process of detailing the basic order of a musical piece with the dyeing and further embellishment of a textile. He then inverts the analogy to describe connoisseurial apprehension:

An old song is like an ancient fabric, the merits of which are familiar and the beauty of which becomes more apparent as one continues to gaze upon it and consider it:

⁵³ El-Bizri, 2012: 46–47 n. 109. ⁵⁴ Sabra, 2009; Tabbaa, 1985. ⁵⁵ Wright, 2004: 363–367.

the more one ponders, the more its beauties register, whereas the modern song is like a new fabric that appears at first, but the more one considers it the more evident its faults become, and the more its splendor fades.⁵⁶

The Persian literary critic Shams-i Qays (1204–1230) indicated the analogous nature of poetry and art, pointing out the frequent comparison of poetry to a patterned brocade, a rhythmic arabesque, or stringing a necklace according to the rules of measured composition and proportion. Likewise, poetry of the Alhambra depended on a kaleidoscope of metaphors of gardens, jewelry, color, and harmony that often inverted the relationship between subject and object by speaking through the voice of the building. As Olga Bush explains, “In addition to a mimetic and a contemplative gaze, then, poetic epigraphy articulates a self-reflexive gaze, speaking for the ways in which architecture and objects *wish to be seen*, as well as the ways beholders may see themselves in relation to the works of art they behold.”⁵⁷ Similarly, the Ottoman literary theorist Muslih al-Din Mustafa Sururi (1491–1562) used craft metaphors, comparing the ornamental arts of poetry to wall ornament (*naksh*), tile work, and inlay.⁵⁸

Not merely decorative, applied geometries could be allegorically embellished. An early twelfth-century wall tiling at the Friday mosque in Isfahan using the geometry in [Figure 33](#) incorporates the following verse:

When they rolled up the letter of our accusation
Took and weighed it against the balance of actions
Our guilt was more than everyone else, and yet
They forgave us through the kindness of ‘Ali.⁵⁹

Interpreting geometric form, such verse corresponds to the interpretation of a painting. The geometries function not simply as mathematical constructs or decoration, but are read as of movement, here the rolling of a letter. As in a naturalistic painting, the forms signal something beyond what is immediately visible. Yet unlike in an iconographic practice, where this geometry would signify a fixed meaning, this interpretive practice relies on the productive associations of the viewer. This may reflect an aspect of metaphor (*isti’ara*) framed in al-Jurjani’s exposition of rhetoric which deliberately confuses subject and object, allowing for a diversity of interpretations.⁶⁰ In this example, verse guides the viewer to a single association particularly relevant to its use at this site. Applied to such forms, words such as ‘ornament’ or ‘decoration’ implicitly associate representation with naturalism in the European tradition. Conversely, such

⁵⁶ Wright, 2004: 365. ⁵⁷ Bush, 2018: 101. ⁵⁸ Necipoğlu, 1995: 185.

⁵⁹ Kheirandish, 2017: 93, 95. ⁶⁰ Robinson, 1997: 153.

versification suggests that geometry may have a representational function informed by practices of conditioned reception not explicit to a casual viewer.

Using music less as a formal than as a processual analogy, Jafer Agha's seventeenth-century biography of court architect Mehmet Agha, designer of the Sultan Ahmet Mosque, uses transmediality to delineate the similitudes of sacred space. Framing the biography of the creative individual in the context of the divine, who creates without a compass, his prophets and the first four caliphs, Jafer both avoids the threat of *shirk* inherent in praising human creativity and situates human creation within divine cosmology. He depicts Mehmet as initially attracted by music, then proceeds to explain contemporary music theory beginning with its Pythagorean origins. However, guided by the scholarly interpretation of a dream in which gypsies lead him away, Mehmet learns that gypsies are associated with *jinn* (malevolent spirits mentioned in the Quran), and discovers the art of marquetry, also based on Pythagorean geometry. Coupled with his modest and pious character, his unparalleled artistic mastery allows him to gain the attention of the sultan, who likens the beauty of his forms to intoxication with wine. Although dismissed by Owen Wright as a quaint detail, this association with music comes full circle as the construction of Mehmet's crowning achievement, the Mosque of Sultan Ahmet (1616) is endowed with cosmological significance through the sounds of its construction.⁶¹ Mehmet's training in the "science of music," disparaged earlier in the work, is redeemed through association with sacred space. Three sets of modes correspond to twelve types of stone, creating four pitches by seven workmen. The process of creating the mosque thus contains a numerical cosmology through sonic analogy. The sound of chisels resounding on stone corresponds to a vocalized "*hu*," central to Mevlevi ceremonies of remembrance. Workers thus bring the mosque into being by articulating the presence of God – "him" (*hu*) – by working the stone. A long poem then praises the mosque, likening it to a cosmographic space transformed through prayer into a rose garden of paradise:

Each of the bright roses wore a turban on its head.

White turbans encircled the garden of the world.

Everywhere the nightingale sounded the call to prayer.

The congregation of trees turned toward the kibla in rows.

Bowing and prostration filled the garden of the world.⁶²

⁶¹ Wright, 2004: 367. ⁶² Crane, 1987: 68, 73.

Where Nizami and Jami had compared architecture to the cosmos through analogies of form, here the analogy expands to include sound and movement (see [Chapter 7.4b](#) and [Chapter 8.2](#)). Seemingly casual anecdotes underscore the beauty of the mosque that came not from external, disinterested qualities, but through qualities intrinsic to the process of construction. These were enabled through the architect's training in cosmological knowledge through music, his vocational election in a dream, and the good character thereby bestowed on him, as on the calligraphers described in and Qadi Ahmad and Mustafa 'Ali's treatises. These intrinsic qualities were further fortified through the process of construction, which created cosmological space through a ceremony enabling union with the divine. The mosque renders permanent the sacrality created in the performance of the *sama* (see [Chapter 2.1](#)).

The persistence of a culture understanding geometry as representation of such correlations and divine similitudes is perhaps nowhere more succinctly expressed than in an eighteenth-century argument used to dismiss it in favor of naturalism. Much as modernists argued against the trap of visual verisimilitude at the turn of the twentieth century, the Ottoman poet Sünbülzade Vehbi (1718?–1809) advised his son:

Do not esteem geometry
Avoid getting caught in that circle of distraction.⁶³

For him the dangerous realism that renders the image simultaneously attractive and deceptive *pharmakon* occurs not in painting, but in the structural realism of pattern. In distracting, it takes us away from the concrete world of naturalistic representation. His modernity redefines interiority as a distraction.

Yet according to several scholars today, the mimetic properties of geometry had long since been forgotten. Yasser Tabbaa proposes that under the Abbasid caliphate the extensive use of polyhedral isometric geometry may initially have served to propagate Ash'arite orthodoxy and signal allegiance to Abbasid sovereignty with no awareness of its theological implications.⁶⁴ Similarly, Necipoğlu implies that the heritage of Platonism embedded in Islamic visual culture proliferated into a polysemy of meanings no longer affiliated with antiquity.⁶⁵ Both argue that geometric form signaled dynastic or regional identity while confirming Grabar's reluctance to recognize a consistent underlying conceptual meaning. Similarly, Wright discounts active knowledge of the relationship between

⁶³ Necipoğlu, 1995: 219. ⁶⁴ Tabbaa, 2001. ⁶⁵ Necipoğlu, 1995: 222–223.

music and mathematics based on an absence of their discussion in theoretical texts of the sixteenth century.⁶⁶ On the contrary, the repetition of similitudes in poetry, as well as Jafer's choice to frame the architect's life through music and his description of workmanship through the analogy of a Sufi *dhikr* underscores a sophisticated allusion to something too familiar to need explanation. Recent assertions that such knowledge had been forgotten assume that intellectual meaning relies on demonstrative textual or ritual rearticulation. The historical methodological expectation of exegesis external to artistic practice thus reduces the philosophical–theological discursive framework of Islamic discourses to a means of political identification.

Conversely universalizing, several studies attempt to interpret transmedial isometric geometries as an expression of cosmologies essential to Islamic faith. *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture* by Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtyar applied the concept of *tawhid* to geometric repetition, interpreting “geometric patterns as eternal archetypes that could lead the contemplative mind from outer appearances to inner esoteric realities of Sufism through spiritual hermeneutics.”⁶⁷ In connection with the 1976 Festival of Islam, Issam El-Said and Ayşe Parman's *Geometric Concepts in Islamic Art* indicates the correspondences between poetic, musical, and geometrical structures.⁶⁸ For participants in the festival, using symbolic language to engage with perceptual culture provided a more meaningful introduction to Islam than the historicism of museums or direct readings of the Quran. Yet the preference, expressed by one of the directors of the festival, Titus Burkhardt, for the authenticity of native informants can be misleading, in that practitioners of a faith often lack awareness of the vast changes that can accrue in a belief system over even short time spans and in close geographies.⁶⁹ More comprehensively embedding his arguments in historical documentation, Akkach elucidates the “sense of integrated spatiality that brings cosmology, geography, the human body, and architecture together, allowing them to be seen in terms of one another without need for theoretical mediation.”⁷⁰

This absence of a need for theoretical mediation suggests a perceptual culture transcending verbalization. If art is thus the agent of its own meaning, the semiotics of iconography and of demonstrative criticism

⁶⁶ Wright, 2004: 67. ⁶⁷ Necipoğlu, 1995: 77; Ardalan and Bakhtyar, 1973.

⁶⁸ El-Said and Parman, 1976; Necipoğlu, 1995: 204–208. ⁶⁹ Necipoğlu, 1995: 78.

⁷⁰ Akkach, 2005a: xix.

(such as that practiced in the modern analytical humanities) becomes secondary. Yet this self-signification remains distinct from formalist art-historical methods, which Riegl established with the idea that form would express the external *Weltanschauung* of a given culture. Non-semiotic expressions of perceptual culture, such as geometry and music, do not bring the outside world into the subject. Rather, they enable the sensory recognition of self.

This self conceives its subjectivity not as a disembodied abstraction, but through the soul's mediation of sensory data. This becomes evident in ibn al-Haytham's *Optics*. His description of intromission as paradigmatic of human psychology resonates with precepts introduced by the Brethren. Despite the experimental orientation through which the *Optics* encourages the reader to verify the author's observations, ibn al-Haytham presumed that sensible entities were prone to error. He saw the sensory world as inherently corrupt and unstable, as opposed to the imaginary world that emerges through the certification of reason. For him, the sensible does not exist in reality. Conversely, "the imagined form is grasped according to its truth, and does not continuously change with the variation of whomsoever imagines it."⁷¹ In contrast to our contemporary understanding, the most true Real is not embodied in materiality, but in imaginability.

Thus objects do not exist in their external quiddity, but are understood as coming into being in the mind. This becomes clear in the divergence of ibn al-Haytham's from the previous Aristotelian model. In the *Physics*, Aristotle defines space (*topos*) statically, as the "innermost motionless surface of the containing body that is in contact with what it contains."⁷² In contrast, for ibn al-Haytham the perception of space required the perpetual movement of the eye and the spectator to consolidate information provided by "glancing" physical vision. He conceived of space as an imagined void (*al-khala al-mutakhayyal*), and geometry as an immaterial body. Space loses its concrete relationship with tangible reality and becomes a geometrical abstraction representing the void.

This geometric conception of space makes the seemingly fixed position of an observer inherently deceptive both through the positioning of the eye and through recognition of the three-dimensional body.

When sight perceives a body surrounded by intersecting surfaces of which one is plane, then assuming the plane surface to be frontally facing the eye, and the remaining surfaces that intersect the frontal surface to be either perpendicular or inclined to it in such a way as to converge behind it, so that only the frontal surface

⁷¹ El-Bizri, 2005: 201. ⁷² Quoted in El-Bizri, 2005: 208.

is visible, then sight will sense of this and similar bodies their extension in length and breadth alone; it will not sense the solidity of bodies of this description. Assume, however, that sight perceives a body that is surrounded by intersecting surfaces of which the one facing the eye is inclined to the frontal direction, whatever the figure of that surface; assume, further, that the surface intersects another of the body's surfaces in such a way that the eye perceives the intersection of the two surfaces along with perceiving them together; then, because of that intersection, sight will perceive the bending of the body's surface in the direction of depth. And if it perceives the bending of the body's surface, then it will perceive the body's extension in that depth. But it perceives of the inclined surface the extension of that body in length and breadth. And by perceiving the body's extension in length, breadth and depth, it will perceive the body's solidity. Therefore sight will perceive the solidity of bodies situated in this manner with respect to the eye.⁷³

Besides recognizing the necessity of 'unconscious inferences' such as comparison and memory for sensation to be transformed by the brain into conscious perception, ibn al-Haytham noted the crucial importance of eye movement for observing the visible world. The problem of three-dimensional depiction was also discussed by Isma'il al-Razzaz al-Jazari (1136–1206) in *The Book of Ingenious Devices*, written in Diyarbakir under Artukid rule: "One realizes that there is obscurity in the representations of solid bodies, but in the imagination one can fit one thing to another, view it from another, dissect it, and thus assemble it step by step."⁷⁴ Necipoğlu notes that such insights contrast with the "reduction of the beholder to an immobile and disembodied eye in Renaissance single-point perspective, constituting a human subject that is hardly 'humanist.'"⁷⁵ It would seem that the vaunted singular gaze enacted through perspectivalism does less to give man a Godly overview of the world than to reduce Man and God alike under the aegis of Humanism.

The recognition of proportions as a phenomenon embodied in multiple media, both mathematical and not, engages a different relationship between human and divine from that dominating perspectivalism. Rather than limiting God through the metaphor of man, in control from one place, it expands man through the metaphor of God, existent in all places. Thus Rumi explains:

In form, you are the microcosm
While inwardly, you are the macrocosm.⁷⁶

A geometric counterpart to this emerges in ibn al-Haytham's solution for representing three dimensions on two dimensions – the problem that

⁷³ Sabra, 1989: 169. ⁷⁴ Necipoğlu, 1995: 152. ⁷⁵ Necipoğlu, 2015: 34. ⁷⁶ Rumi, 2017: 34.

perspectival representation in Europe purports to solve. For him, the representation of a mathematical solid on a plane depends on moving around and seeing the object from multiple angles (see [Chapter 4](#)). Nader El-Bizri provocatively glosses his discussion, referring to the planes in Sabra's translation as ways of seeing a cube. He explains:

A partial un-concealment of an opaque object in vision is always associated with the concealment of some of its surfaces ... when an opaque box that has the form of a cube is within my field of vision, I can only see three of its sides simultaneously, which appear as skewed planes rather than squares. Nonetheless, when I look at these intersecting planes, I see a cube with sides as squares. Unlike its appearing aspects, the orthogonal structure of the cube, which is delimited by square sides, is preserved in its geometric form as a solid within the *distorting* visual effects of perspective ... Either perception is frontal, and the cube faces the eye in such a way that one of its sides is perpendicular to the axis of the virtual cone of vision, and hence appears as a square; or the third dimension of the cube is shown via an inclination in depth when viewed laterally.⁷⁷

Having referred to the relationship between the rays from an object and the eye as a form of pointillism, his shift toward the language of the cube invites comparison with modernist artistic cubism. Rather than pursuing a facile, nationalistic trope of cubism *avant la lettre*, this implication takes seriously nineteenth-century philosophical engagements with Eastern philosophies informing cubism.

El-Bizri's discussion of the cube represented from all sides resembles Jean Metzinger's 1913 discussion in *Cubism and Tradition*.

Already they have uprooted the prejudice that commanded the painter to remain motionless in front of the object, at a fixed distance from it, and to catch on the canvas no more than a retinal photograph more or less modified by 'personal feeling.' They have allowed themselves to move around the object in order to give under the control of intelligence a concrete representation of it, made up of several successive aspects. Formerly a picture took possession of space, now it reigns also in time.⁷⁸

Interpreting the philosophy of Henri Bergson (1859–1941) as resisting monarchist political symbolism, these early cubists understood the simultaneity of viewing perspectives as symbolic of liberation from historical identity.⁷⁹ Rather than conceiving of collective identity as located in history, they conceived it as an intuitive expression of the vital force (*élan vital*) of the people emerging from the overlapping moments implicit in *duration* (see [Introduction 0.3](#)). The resulting simultaneity of expression

⁷⁷ El-Bizri, 2005: 196. ⁷⁸ Mitchell, 1977: 177. ⁷⁹ Antliff, 1992.

would give the artist the social mandate to reveal a collective identity to his society. Although some of his admirers in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries compared Bergson's thought to that of his friend the French Sufi René Guénon (1886–1951) and contemporary trends in theosophy (a pseudo-philosophical amalgam of Eastern teachings rooted in recent translations by Orientalists), he framed his work as purely Western, citing Neoplatonic inspiration.⁸⁰ Similarly, Piet Mondrian came to paint works resembling a sixteenth-century Persian calligraphic panel by abstracting the intrinsic geometries of a tree, drawing both on his knowledge of the cubist movement during his student years in Paris and on his involvement in the theosophical movement.⁸¹

The thought of Bergson and ibn al-Haytham, and the formal properties of a sixteenth-century calligraphic panel and a twentieth-century cubist painting resemble each other not by accident, but because they share sources of thought, itself rooted in observations of nature. Is this Western or Platonic, theosophical or Islamic? The question itself veers between the cultural appropriation in assuming Platonism to be purely Western and the competitiveness of doing something first. Rather than looking to the contentious competition of Zeuxis und Parhassius, we might remember the cooperation modeled by the Greek and Chinese artists, who build on one another's work in order to recognize a space transcending the materiality of identity and enabling the recognition of truth.

Such shared interest in structural rather than superficial realism proved inspiring for modern Turkish intellectuals trying to incorporate Islamic traditions into enforced modernity. In his 1931 *Democracy and Art*, İsmail Hakkı (Baltacıoğlu) proposes art as necessary for democracy.⁸² He says:

The artist speaks the immanent/mystic conditions that exist within a people, but which are either asleep or are not conscious enough to express themselves and thereby gives his people a language, that is a consciousness. In this manner souls which have unwittingly been separated and segregated come together. For this reason, the role of the artist is in one sense a moral role, because it serves for social unity. This underlies the comparison of the artist to a concave mirror. As a function of its technical nature, this living mirror collects the scattered lights around it into its own focal point and reflects them more warmly and with greater shine. The people find themselves in the artist. For this reason, the greatest sign of the soul of the artist is love.⁸³

⁸⁰ Gouhier, 1993. ⁸¹ Fingesten, 1961.

⁸² He acquired his surname in 1934, with the adoption of a law requiring surnames.

⁸³ İsmail Hakkı, 1931: 27.

He further argues that the artist serves to funnel the unconscious spirit of society:

The duty of the artist does not consist of a historical rapture or expression relating to the past. Art has an entirely living duty. And that is to put the man of society to sleep, to keep the man of society busy in the realm of dreams, and in this manner to obtain, a quite useable, rested group of nerves, a fresh communal conscience ... He will awake to life more well and better prepared ... For this reason, the artist must and needs to be a man of his times.⁸⁴

Although citing only European sources and advocating cubism, his ideas echo both the competition of the artists and the slumber-induced social activism that the Brethren attributed to geometric design – an agent that would intrinsically induce positive social change, without linguistic intermediary. Cubism served not simply as an indicator of modernity, but of a modernity infused with local perceptual culture informed by European engagements with Islam.

İsmail Hakkı hoped to induce social renewal by fostering cubism. In 1933 he became one of the primary supporters of the *d* Group, a group of artists exhibiting together who had studied in Paris with André Lhote and Fernand Léger, both among the Bergsonian cubists of Paris. Although other artists had already used cubist styles in Turkey and the visual style of this group was not always cubist, the group identified itself with cubism as a signal of multivocal democracy resisting the centralized authority of a single-party system.

The intimate link between the republican suppression of religious culture and cubism is reflected in the work of Halil (Dikmen, 1906–1964), who studied with İsmail Hakkı in 1925, and with Lhote in Paris, and began exhibiting with the *d* Group in 1939, a year after he became the first director of the Istanbul Museum of Painting and Sculpture, founded in 1938. Trained as a master on the *ney*, he experienced the privatization of music education after the Westernization of instruction that occurred as the *Darülelhan* was renamed as the Turkish Music Academy in 1926. Like the growth of Western modes of painting since the nineteenth century, impositions of Western dress including the hat legislation of 1925, and the Latinization of script in 1928, which laid waste to the calligraphic tradition, this closure indicated a radical Westernization of national culture strengthened by the outlawing of Turkish music on the radio in 1932. Nonetheless the long tradition of master–student relationships rooted in Sufi

⁸⁴ İsmail Hakkı, 1931: 49.

brotherhoods at the core of musical education persisted in private homes, where Halil learned from ney masters concurrently with undergoing formal painting training at the Academy for Fine Arts. Such private cultural circles gained importance after the closure of Sufi lodges in 1928.

In this context, Halil's combination of musical and visual artistic practices suggests an integration of traditional musical concepts within modernist painting. Invited to the Salon d'Automne in Paris in 1929 for a still life entitled *Potted Geranium*, he gave a lecture on Turkish music to a conference of Orientalists at the Musée Guimet.⁸⁵ One of his early cubist works depicts ney players, robed and standing in a row with long caps on bowed heads, in a cubist style in which repetition suggests the visualization of musical rhythms. [Plate 17] Sonic geometry transforms into modulated, dark forms in which a figural foreground merges with the background, enabling the subterfuge of tradition within the formal vocabulary of universal modernism.

This short excursion into twentieth-century Turkey suggests the mechanisms of loss implicit in the teleology of otherwise celebratory modernity. If the types of knowledge invested in poetry, music, and geometry appear forgotten to scholars of the late twentieth century, it is not because they had naturally disappeared across the course of time. Rather, as in other aspects of modernity, living cultural traditions were actively suppressed and redirected toward modernist formats of expression submissive to Western hegemony. It only takes one generation to forget a way of knowing embodied in practice. Even as art historians increasingly and fruitfully delve into the history of mid-twentieth-century Middle Eastern art, we run the risk of perpetuating the celebratory, nationalist ideologies of the secularist, Westernizing regimes that suppressed the preceding culture in the formation of the modern nation-state.

Despite this, the agency of forms persists. Polyhedral isometric geometry diagrams unbounded isometric space on the surfaces of finite objects. Surpassing the object, pattern encourages the viewer to both see the form of the object or architecture and to recognize that form is also embedded in an infinite spatial geometry. Far from simply decorating the object or the architectural surface, such surface treatment undermines the limits of the object. By inviting the contemplation of continuity beyond these boundaries, such geometry invites contemplation of a reality beyond matter. In contrast to perspective, which depends on the fixed position of the viewing subject, such geometry refuses to place the subject. Wherever the viewing

⁸⁵ Ayvazoğlu, 2007: 61–80.

subject looks, he or she experiences a new center. Thus the subject is continually decentered within an infinity of possibilities. In its ability to reveal an intangible structure, geometry functions like music in its relationship with the cosmos. Geometry does not represent; it makes the Real present.

Ironically, although they deny the capacity of geometry for intrinsic meaning, the comparisons employed by European art historians demonstrate its communicative capacity. Describing a ceiling in the Alhambra Palace, Jones likens the seven patterns to the seven notes in the musical scale.⁸⁶ Similarly, Kühnel draws on the synesthetic terms of music to suggest that the rhythmical alternation of movement enabled geometry to render a harmonious effect.⁸⁷ Likewise, Grabar suggests that the ambiguity and ambivalence of arabesque give the viewer subjective freedom. “Like the beads of the holy man, the meditation it suggests is not in itself but in the mind of the beholder.”⁸⁸ Ignoring the utility of a rosary for a believer, Grabar alienates the modern reader from a world in which meaning emerges precisely through, and not despite, this internalization. Rather than finding its limit, the possibility of understanding art begins in this moment. Perhaps when Schjedhal suggested that Islamic art at the museum was watching him, his intuition was not so far off the mark (see [Introduction 0.1](#)). Rather, although adhering to an essentially Kantian supposed objectivity characteristic of art history, the recognition of artistic affectivity in these statements resembles the anthropologist Alfred Gell’s incorporation of abductive reasoning in his theorization of artistic agency through the ‘enchantment’ of the observer.⁸⁹

The apparent opposition between Western and Islamic ways of looking pertains not simply to art, but to our ideas of how subjectivity functions. Necipoğlu notes the divergence between the geometrical siblings, perspective and pattern. She explains:

Geometric *girih* patterns, composed of interlocking stars and polygons rotating around multiple foci of radial symmetry, embodied a multiplicity of viewpoints contradicting the Renaissance concept of the picture plane as a window frame that cuts through the spectator’s cone of vision on which rays converge at a central vanishing point. The absence of a fixed viewpoint in the abstract geometric matrices of *girih*s yielded an infinite isotropic space that amounted to a denial of the naturalistic representation of the visible world.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Necipoğlu, 1995: 209.

⁸⁷ Necipoğlu, 1995: 75.

⁸⁸ Grabar, 1973: 202.

⁸⁹ Gell, 1998.

⁹⁰ Necipoğlu, 1995: 166.

She builds on this opposition by associating elaborately patterned surfaces with subjectivity: “Their infinitely extendable, non-directional patterns of line and color, with no single focal point or hierarchical progression towards a decorative climax, required the insertion of subjectivity into the optical field; they presumed a private way of looking.”⁹¹ This “private way of looking” does more than reflect the inward mimesis permeating Islamic discourses of perception as outlined in this book. It also contrasts a public or objective way of looking supposedly represented by perspective. Necipoğlu’s recognition of isometric geometry as a cultural counterpoint to perspective begs the question of whether and how polyhedral isometric geometry translates as a meaningful model for subjectivity.

Yet an answer to this question requires a deposition of the natural attitude we accord to perspective as a metaphor for subjectivity. The [next chapter](#) undermines the teleology embedded in modern European discourses about perspective as paradigmatic of Western rational subjectivity. The resulting destabilization of what we have held as the natural basis for reason paves the way for alternative understandings of the subject and reason, explored in the conclusion. Between the structure of the mimetic image and the powerful metaphors accorded to it, what might it mean to lack perspective?

⁹¹ Necipoğlu, 1995: 204.

Since the early twentieth century, art-historical writings have imbued perspective with a foundational role in Western subjectivity, associated with reason, objectivity, mastery, and, implicitly, masculinity. Elkins dubs this “metaphorical perspective.” He explains:

As we try to articulate a thought, to ‘plot it out,’ to ‘map’ its contours, we are ‘drawn’ towards perspectival metaphors. Any opinion is a ‘standpoint,’ a ‘point of view’; we ‘approach’ problems; we ‘draw parallels’ or speak of the ‘convergence of ideas’; we ‘project,’ measure,’ survey,’ and ‘sketch’ continuously. Every thought, to the degree that it is in our possession, contributes to our ‘perspective.’¹

Contemporaneous with a political economy of European colonial domination over the Global South, the understanding of Islamic art as ‘lacking’ perspective frames Islamic cultures within the broader associations of Orientalism: examined rather than examining; static rather than progressive, traditional rather than scientific, passive and feminized.² Signifying the supposed prohibition of the image and the supposed absence of naturalism equated with the use of perspective, the supposed meaninglessness of polyhedral geometry has symbolized a lack set against the signification of rational plenitude attributed to perspectival representation. Yet, as shown in [Chapter 9](#), geometry has meaning. And, as this section will show, the meaningfulness of perspective is as artificial a construct as the meaninglessness generally attributed to Islamic geometries.

Destabilizing the ideology of perspective, this chapter examines how a mere technique of three-dimensional spatial representation has become symbolic of Western subjectivity as the measure of reason, naturalizing global hegemony in the twentieth century. It argues that far from presaging a modern, secular, and supposedly objective way of looking, discussions of perspective in the seventeenth century were deeply engaged with proofs of the existence of God. This limited the potential that perspectivalism held for enabling multifaceted ways of looking comparable to those emphasized in Islamic spatial theories. Instead, the insistence on a singular perspective

became a means of parochially governing representation both literally and, more importantly, metaphorically. The assertion of a single proper point of view shifted from the mastery of God to man, and from European man to colonial mastery. Although perspective has not, since the early twentieth century, provided the primary structure of naturalistic representation in art, it has continued to structure our view of (art) history from a present, conceived as singular, looking into the past, conceived as linear. ‘Slighting’ means to destroy a fortress without opposition. By slighting the fortress of perspectivalism, this section forges new paths to shift our gaze not to, but from, an infinity of positions imagined by using *giri*h as an alternative metaphor for subjectivity.

The representation of space through the projection of three dimensions onto a two-dimensional surface through the technique of perspective has become widely lauded as the seminal artistic achievement of the Italian Renaissance. Dominant models of its development describe it as signaling a departure from a medieval worldview centered on God ruling over a finite, Aristotelian cosmos in which Man was a mere microcosm toward a man-centered worldview. This supposedly natural growth in representational verisimilitude serves as an indicator of European progress toward paradigmatic, rational, and scientific modernity in a world increasingly shedding religious in favor of secular premises.³ This historiography frames perspective as symbolic of a cohesive ‘West’ persisting from the fifteenth century until the challenge of artistic modernism (particularly Impressionism and post-Impressionism) in the late nineteenth century. Yet emerging concurrently with modernism, this teleological narrative constructs an ideology rather than describing a history of Western subjectivity. Reframed through its transcultural and religious history, perspectivalism becomes a symbol less of naturally truthful representation than a history of the restrictions, technical and ideological, underlying such a conflation of vision and truth.

Although often associated with Euclidean geometry, early forays into perspective relied on surveying, not on theoretical mathematics. The technique emerged as a pragmatic means of achieving the illusionism sought in Renaissance painting, complementing other techniques addressed in *Il libro dell’arte* by Cennino d’Andrea Cennini (1360–c.1427). Although Leon Battista Alberti’s *De Pittura* (1435) provides the first instructions for perspectival drawing, the Florentine architect Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446) is often credited with its invention. According to

³ Edgerton, 2009.

Giannozzo Manetti (1396–1459), Brunelleschi established the need to fix the position of the viewing subject. On a small panel, he depicted the temple of San Giovanni as seen from a fixed position in a portal directly across from it. He then placed a hole at position of the viewer, across from the point of convergence, and had the viewer look through the hole through a mirror placed opposite in order to see the scene in accurate perspective.⁴ This construction did not rely on geometry but on observation. Similarly, an anonymous contemporary biography of Alberti relates that he constructed a sort of peep show in Rome before he went to Florence. He displayed works in a closed box through a tiny hole, which fixed the position of the gaze so that it would be correctly positioned to experience the illusion of size enabled through perspectival construction. Alberti mentions this demonstration in *De Pittura* as one of the miracles of painting which he used to demonstrate in Rome.⁵

In *De Pittura*, Alberti bases such physical demonstrations on survey geometry, providing practical tips for artists. He recognizes the picture plane as a cross-section of the visual pyramid that emerges from the imaginary rays between the seen object and the eye at the apex of the pyramid.

The plane is measured by rays that serve the sight – called by them visual rays – which carry the form of the thing seen to the sense. For these same rays extended between the eye and the plane seen come together very quickly by their own force and by a certain marvelous subtlety, penetrating the air and thin and clear objects they strike against something dense and opaque, where they strike with a point and adhere to the mark they make . . . We can imagine those rays to be like the finest hairs of the head, or like a bundle, tightly bound within the eye where the sense of sight has its seat. The rays, gathered together within the eye, are like a stalk; the eye is like a bud which extends its shoots rapidly and in a straight line to the plane opposite.⁶

Concerned only with painting, he avoids the questions of extra- and intromission as well as whether the visual image forms on the lens or the base of the eye. Rather, his emphasis is on the structure of the picture plane. He describes this first through the metaphor of the window:

When [painters] fill the circumscribed places with colors, they should seek only to present the forms of things seen on this plane as if it were of transparent glass. Thus the visual pyramid could pass through it, placed at a definite distance with definite

⁴ Alberti, 1966: 106 n. 27; Damisch, 1995: 115–116. ⁵ Alberti, 1966: 106 n. 27, 51.

⁶ Alberti, 1966: 45–46.

lights and a definite position of center in space and in a definite place in respect to the observer. Each painter, endowed with his natural instinct, demonstrates this when, in painting this plane, he places himself at a distance as if searching the point and angle of the pyramid from which point he understands the thing painted is best seen.⁷

Through this description, Alberti establishes a fixed viewpoint for the artist complementing the point of convergence within the picture plane. He implies that the viewer of the work will ultimately stand in the place of the artist, an interpretation first written in the *Perspectivae Librisex* (Pesaro, 1600) of Guidobaldo del Monte.⁸ As the image becomes fixed through this single vantage point, the subject who paints/views the image becomes equally immobile.

Alberti later provides a pragmatic means of transferring this window onto the picture plane as he describes the process he calls “circumscription,” referring to the construction of the outline of the image:

Nothing can be found, so I think, which is more useful than that veil which among my friends I call an intersection. It is a thin veil, finely woven, dyed whatever color pleases you and with larger threads [marking out] as many parallels as you prefer. This veil I place between the eye and the thing seen, so the visual pyramid penetrates through the thinness of the veil. This veil can be of great use to you. Firstly, it always presents to you the same unchanged plane. Where you have placed certain limits, you quickly find the true cuspid of the pyramid. This would certainly be difficult without the intersection. You know how difficult it is to imitate a thing which does not continue to present the same appearance, for it is easier to copy painting than sculpture. You know that as the distance and the position of the center are changed, the thing you see seems greatly altered . . . Secondly, you will easily be able to constitute the limits of the outline and of the planes.⁹

Both Brunelleschi's and Alberti's demonstrations oppose the movement inherent in our natural experience of the world by necessitating a static position: the transparent effect of the picture plane conceived as a window onto infinity only becomes possible through limitations established through the restriction of the peephole, the reflection of the mirror, and the obfuscation of the veil.

The unmediated truth offered by perspective proves illusory not only historically, but also historiographically. Hubert Damisch (1928–2017) points to the blurry origins of Manetti's narrative, saying, “the position that tradition assigns to *the discovery or invention associated with*

⁷ Alberti, 1966: 51. ⁸ Frangenberg, 1986: 164. ⁹ Alberti, 1966: 68.

Brunelleschi's name corresponds to the moment of the inversion of practical interest into theoretical interest which was, for Husserl, the condition of science, in the western, European sense of the word" (emphasis added).¹⁰ Brunelleschi serves the function of author-as-category in a narrative that provides Florentine patrimony for a representational device promising the universalization of a singular understanding of vision to Man who stands in for reason as the founding attribute of the West.

Recognition of Alberti's paternity of perspective grew in the twentieth century. In his 1936 essay honoring the recent translation of *De Pittura* into German, the art historian Georg Wolff interprets Alberti's work as celebrating a new era uniting painting with science through geometry. Yet none of his quotations from the work mention mathematics or geometry, and his illustrations stem from later works.¹¹ This informed the thought of William Ivins, curator of prints at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, who credited Alberti with the "invention or discovery of perspective," which he identifies as the moment that divides the pre-Renaissance from the post-Renaissance world. Far from merely describing a painting technique, Ivins claims that "on Alberti's discovery of a rational way to do this all modern perspective and all the various mathematical sciences that have grown out of it are based."¹² Thus science emerges from art. Ivins also provides a direct lineage from the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci to the "diagrams that Alberti may have made to illustrate his description."¹³ Citing these notebooks as the sole model for Jean Pèlerin's 1505 work, he produces a clear genealogy of perspective guiding the reins of civilization on its preordained journey from Florence to France.

Conceiving of Brunelleschi or Alberti as patriarchs of perspective depends on ignoring the history of science. The first European book on perspective was *De scientia perspectiva* written by the Englishman Roger Bacon (1214/15–1294?) during his exile in Paris as a Franciscan monk writing under the patronage of a cardinal. He developed his idea of *perspectiva naturalis* based largely on the translation of the first three books (minus the absent first three chapters of the first book) of ibn al-Haytham's *Book of Optics*, known in Latin as the *De aspectibus* of Alhazen.¹⁴ Bacon's work became part of the basic educational *quadrivium*. Teaching texts developed by John Pecham (1240–92) and a commentary by Vittelione (1220/30–1300/14) became influential during the Renaissance. Continued interest in Alhazen led to a fourteenth-century Italian

¹⁰ Damisch, 1995: 157. ¹¹ Wolff, 1936. ¹² Ivins, 1936: 279. ¹³ Ivins, 1936: 279.

¹⁴ Bush, 2018: 40.

translation of the work. Still widely read in the seventeenth century, it informed Johannes Kepler's *Astronomiae pars optica* (*The Optical Part of Astronomy*, 1604) and Descartes' essay on diatropics in his *A Discourse on the Method of rightly conducting the Reason and seeking Truth in the Sciences: Further the Dioptric, Meteors and Geometry, Essays in this Method* (1637), written in Latin. Nonetheless, in his influential 1924 article "Perspective as Symbolic Form," Panofsky simultaneously recognizes and discounts 'Eastern influences' at the close of antiquity as "less a cause than a symptom and an instrument of the new development."¹⁵ Like Bergson and Mondrian, Panofsky represents a self-sufficient West silently appropriating the achievements of other cultures in the construction of a valorized 'West.'

Yet the circulation of Alhazen's translated work in Florence had clear repercussions. It was read by Lorenzo Ghiberti (1348–1455), who experimented with perspective on the Baptistery Gates of Florence – the same baptistery that Brunelleschi represented on his small panel.¹⁶ Adopted from Alhazen's experiments, shadow casting became a common representational technique.¹⁷ The story of perspective in fifteenth-century Florence thus suggests less a lineage of great men with ingenious discoveries than a communicative intellectual environment open to diverse sources of knowledge, similar in spirit to the transcultural intellectual dynamism of the eleventh-century Islamic world that inspired them – except that while the translators of Baghdad's houses of wisdom were eager to acknowledge diverse and distant sources as a means of enhancing their authority, European historiography has often suppressed similar histories of transculturalism.

In Islamic environments, the realism enabled by geometry was associated with structure rather than appearance. In Europe, the perspectival illusionism enabled by geometry became a powerful narrative device. It could situate the viewer as experiencing a religious vision depicted within the painted surface; portray a landowner surveying his dominion; or construct deceptive optical effects. Perspective transformed the depiction of space into a signifying element in painting. It enabled the creation of an uninhabited spatial field that could indicate relationships of hierarchy through distance or centrality in relation to the viewer. Yet as perspectival techniques spread across Europe, the perils of perspective became apparent. The potential multiplicity of viewpoints it implied threatened the orderly hierarchy of God as represented by the singular viewpoint of

¹⁵ Panofsky, 1991: 48. ¹⁶ Frangenberg, 1986: 152–153. ¹⁷ Bauer, 1987.

Man. The suppression of the potentially revolutionary multiperspectivalism implicit in the roots of perspectival thought transformed perspective from a representational technique into an ideology.

Reflecting on Alhazen's *De aspectibus*, Jean Pèlerin's *De artificiali perspectiva* (1505) was the first work to theorize perspective in relation to subjectivity. Whereas Alberti had excluded Alhazen's argument favoring intromission as irrelevant to painters, Pèlerin uses it in adopting Alhazen's distinction between immediate and contemplative sight. In contrast to Alhazen's interest in multiple views, however, Pèlerin emphasizes the need to select a single view from the multitude of possibilities. For him, perspectival space could be empty and homogeneous, but religious belief required it to be finite. It was bound in depth by the relationship between the viewer and the horizon and bound in latitude by the frame.¹⁸ His 1509 illustration of the point system provides a simple geometric graphic of the system, illustrating how the points of convergence determining one-point perspectival construction limit the spatial frame to what is visible from a single point. [Figure 28] Pèlerin's interpretations disseminated widely: incorporated into an encyclopedia for young people entitled *Margarita philosophica nova* by Grigor Reich in Freiburg in 1508, they were translated into German as *Von der Kunst Perspektiva*, printed in 1509 by Jörg Glockendon the Elder in Nuremberg.¹⁹ As Elkins points out, Renaissance and Baroque techniques of perspective were varied, with little historical consciousness or metaphorical import.²⁰

Nonetheless, some authors affirmed this necessity to limit the potential freedom of perspectivalism. The *Practica della perspettiva* (Venice, 1569) of Daniele Barbaro distinguished between glancing and contemplative sight, but insisted on the static gaze as essential to perspective. While he assented that a rotating eye would establish a more realistic depiction of reality, he asserted that such motility would destroy perspectival integrity. Repetition of this premise made the space established through the construct of geometry appear more real than natural perception. Thinkers from Blaise Pascal to Albert Einstein have reaffirmed the truth that perspective fixes a single viewpoint for the viewer – even when experience suggests that this may not be true.²¹

For our consciousness is not only that of the eye, but of the body. Perspectival construction establishes a distance governed by immobilized

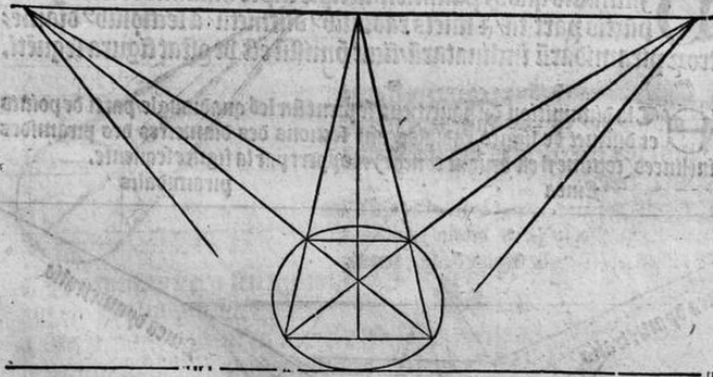
¹⁸ Damisch disputes Panofsky's assertion that Brunelleschi's model prefigures abstract space because it always depicts closed space. Damisch, 1995: 154.

¹⁹ Andersen, 2007: 166. ²⁰ Elkins, 1994: 114–115. ²¹ Maynard, 1996.

Al. viii.

Minoratio autem tetragoni strati/cōprehenditur per lineas visu-
ales a pūcto subiecto super inferiores seu proximos eiusdē agu-
los cadentes: et per sectiōes diāmetroꝝ pyramidarū inclinatarū/pro-
tensarum a tertijs pūctis duplo a subiecto remotis/vel amplius/aut
etiam minus/secundū sedē fingentis: et presentē aut distancē visum.
Circulus vero qui circa tetragonū erectū extat sphericus: circa stratū
fit ovalis aut lēticularis/scdm differētiās sedii/et visū premissoꝝ.
Que propositiones super sequentē figurā possunt cōprehendi.

A minoration du tetragone/cest adire du quadrangle/sterne et couche/ou
gisant en plain/se comprennent par les lignes visuales cheants sur les angles
dicellui inferiores et prochains: et par les sectiōs des diametres des pyramides in-
clinees/protendues des tiers poits/essoignez du subiect/au double des precedens:
ou voirement plus/ou aussi moins que led double/selon le siege du fingent/et pres-
ente ou distāte veue: Et le sercle qui entoure le quadrangle erect se demōstre spheric/
est a l'entour du sterne et gisant/oval/ou lenticulaire: selon la difference des sieges
et venēs premis. Lesquelles propositions sur la figure subsequēte apperēt.



Alia deinde subsequens figura/tetragonum ipsum continet/absqꝫ
spherālī circūferentiā: remanentibus pyramidibus premis. Que
tamen pyramides in singulis similibus figuris nō ponent in integrū:
sed id solum ex eis quod erit necessariū. Licet suffingī/vel subintelligi
eas oporteat: vt constabit intuentibus.

Al. v.

Figure 28 Jean Pèlerin, Diagram, from *De artificiali perspectiva*, 1521. National Central Library Rome, p. 7

sight. It produces desire rooted in the eye rather than in the body. Panofsky relates an anecdote about the Florentine artist Paolo Uccello (1397–1475). Responding to his wife’s call to come to bed, he demurs, “But how sweet perspective is!”²² Calling this preference for representational distance over bodily pleasure “hackneyed,” Panofsky celebrates perspectival disembodiment. Yet artists may not have responded with joy even as they adopted the technique.

Albrecht Dürer’s illustrations of optical devices as aids in perspectival foreshortening suggest implicit misgivings toward the capacity of perspective to divorce the eye from the body and its pleasures. In contrast to earlier Italian deployments of perspective to emphasize powerful figures and architecture, Dürer stages his illustrations in mundane interior settings that marginalize both humans and landscapes. Like the Mughal artist Madhu Khazanad, integrating European techniques into painting only to depict the superiority of music, Dürer demonstrates his mastery of perspective while suggesting the limitations of the technique.

After four volumes that explore the geometrical construction of pattern, space, and typeset, the concluding illustrations in the *Instructions for Measuring with Compass and Ruler* (*Underweysung der Messung mit dem Zirckel un Richtscheyt, in Linien*, Nuremberg, 1525) illustrate the role of the draughtsman. The first image depicts the artist peering through an optical device and painting on a window, doubly removing him from his subject. The subject sits similarly immobilized on a chair, both his eye and that of the artist fixed on his transformation from body into image. To the side, in line with the central sightline, we see signs of life: a well-upholstered bed with a candle and, underneath it, a chamber pot. The image suggests the utility of perspective in the construction of the gentleman, who deserts his own bodily needs to become an object of our gaze. [Figure 29]

On the next page, a draughtsman and an assistant use a weighted plumb line that passes through a frame to create a perspectival pouncing cartoon for use on a painting of a lute, lying supine on the table before them. [Figure 30] Well dressed, an indication of the newfound higher status which the technical mastery of perspective enabled, the artists apply their instruments of measurement to an instrument of pleasure. They thus immobilize a sign of music and dance bodily, for both musician and audience.

A third image, appended to the 1538 edition of the *Underweysung*, furthers this critique. A woman reclines on a table across from the artist

²² Panofsky, 1991: 66.



Ein andre meynung.

Dich drey feden magst du ein ytelich ding das du mit erreychen kanst in ein gemel bringen /
 auf ein dafel zůuerzeychen dem thū also.
 Nist du in einem sal so schlag ein grosse nadel mit einem weyten ö: die darzū gemacht ist in
 ein wand / vnd ses das für ein aug / dardurch zeuch einen starken faden / vnd hencf vnden ein pley ge
 wichte daran / darnach ses einen tisch oder tassel so weyt von dem nadel ö: darinn der faden ist als: du
 wilt / darauff stell stet ein aufrecht ram zwerchs gegen dem nadel ö: hoch oder nider auf welche sey
 ten du wilt / die ein türlein hab das man auf vnd zū müg than / dis türlein sey dein tassel darauf du
 malen wilt. Darnach nagel zwen feden die als lang sind als die aufrecht ram lang vnd preyt ist oben
 vnd mitten in die ram / vnd den anderen auf einer seiten auch mitten in die ram vnd laß sie hangen.
 Darnach mach ein eyfien langen steif der zū forderst am spiz ein nadel ö: hab dareyn feden den lan
 gen faden der durch das nadel ö: an der wand gezogen ist / vnd far mit der nadel vnd langen faden
 durch die ram hinauf / vnd gib sie einem anderen in die hand / vnd wart du der anderen zweyer feden
 die an der ram hangen. Nun brauch dis: also / leg ein lauten oder was dir sunst gefelt so fer von der
 ram als du wilt / vnd das sie vnueruckt pleyb so lang du jr bedarfft / vnd laß deinen gesellen die nadel
 mit dem faden hinauf strecken / auf die nöttigsten puncte der lauten / vnd so oft er auf einem still helt
 vnd den langen faden anstreckt / so schlag altweg die zwen feden an der ram kreuzweys gestracks
 an den langen faden / vnd fleb sie zū yeden orten mit einem wachs an die ram / vnd heysß deinen gesel
 len seinen langen faden nach lassen. Darnach schlag die türlein zū vnd zeichen den selben puncten
 da die feden kreuzweys vber einander gen auf die tassel / darnach thū das türlein wider auf vnd thū

Figure 29 Albrecht Dürer, *Draughtsman Drawing a Man*, from *Underweysung der Messung mit dem Zirckel un Richtscheyt*, in *Linien*, Nuremberg, 1525. SLUB Dresden, S. B. 616

viewing her through a grid. [Figure 31] An optical device immobilizes him. Through it, he looks toward a perspectival convergence point located near her genitals, which her hand provocatively hides. While he looks at this

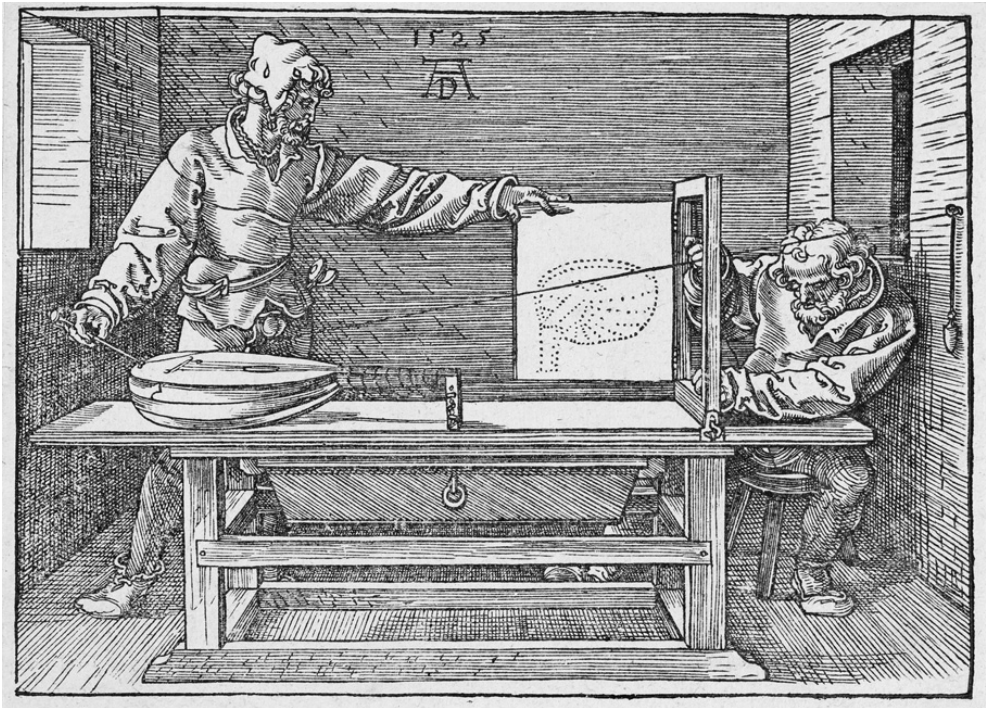


Figure 30 Albrecht Dürer, *Draughtsman Doing Perspectival Drawing of a Lute*, print, 1525. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, Inv. 528–2



Figure 31 Albrecht Dürer, *Draughtsman Executing a Perspective Drawing of a Woman*, from *De Symmetria partium humanorum corporum*, woodcut, c.1600. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 17.37.314

awkward angle, the viewer enjoys her nudity and the view outside. Ignoring all such pleasures, the artist is reduced to the seeing eye and the drawing hand. Although Jonathan Crary imputes to the nineteenth century

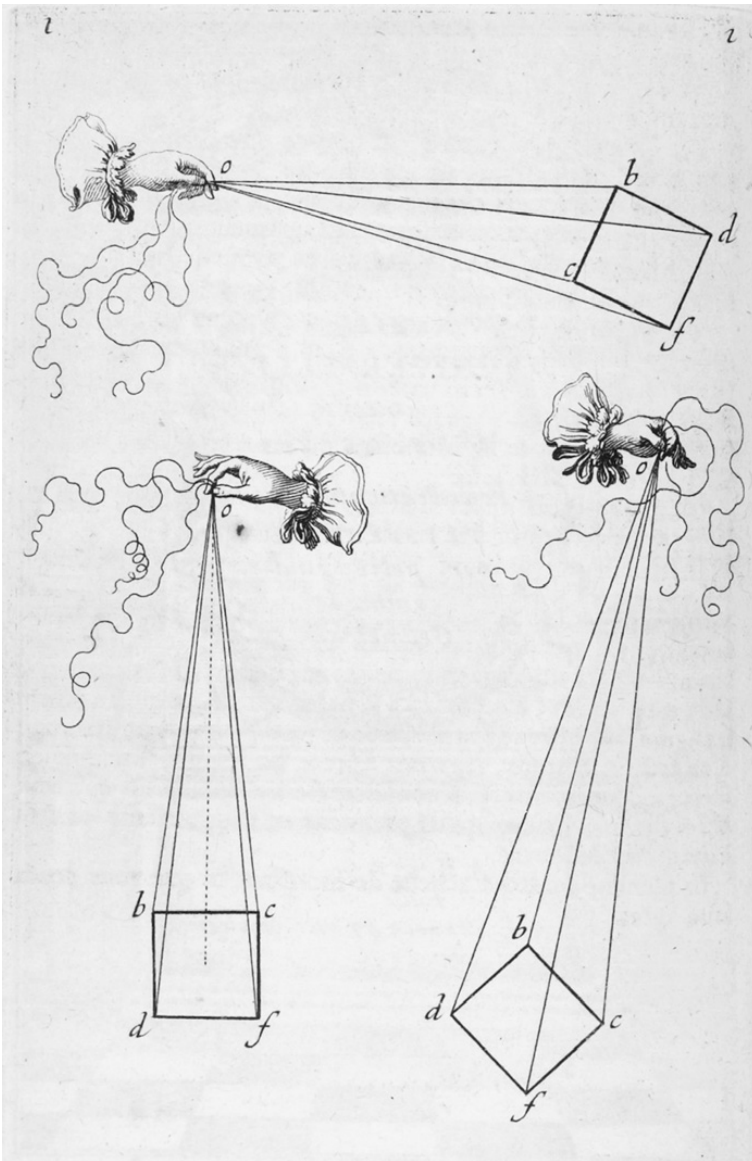


Figure 32 Abraham Bosse's *Manière Universelle de Mr. Desargues pour pratiquer la Perspective par petit-pied, comme le geometral* (Paris, 1648), [Plate 1](#), Bibliothèque d'institut national de l'histoire de l'art, NUM 8 RES 145

the separation of the senses resulting from an industrial remapping of the body, these comical renditions of perspectival techniques suggest a critique of representational disembodiment.²³

²³ Crary, 1996: 19.

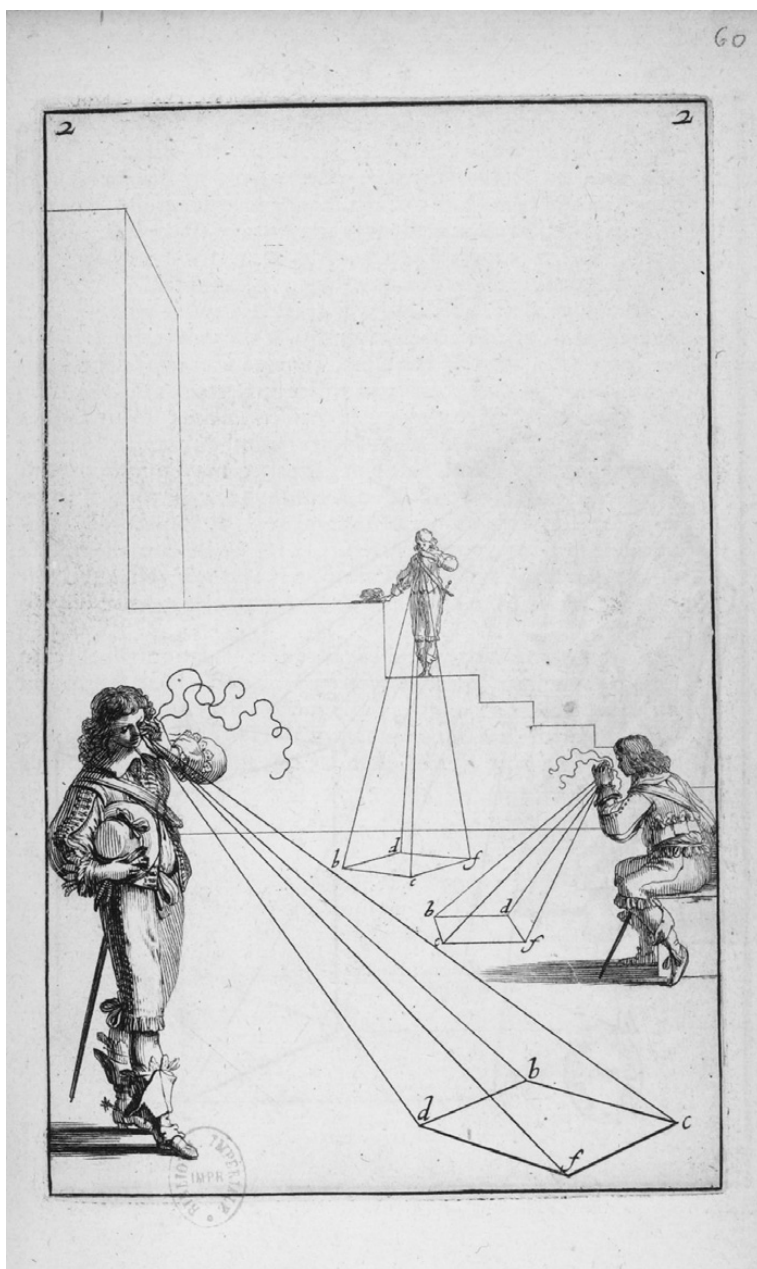


Figure 33 Abraham Bosse's *Manière Universelle de Mr. Desargues pour pratiquer la Perspective par petit-pied, comme le geometral* (Paris, 1648), [Plate 2](#), Bibliothèque d'institut national de l'histoire de l'art, NUM 8 RES 145

Similar interests inform Abraham Bosse's *Manière universelle de Mr. Desargues pour pratiquer la Perspective par petit-pied, comme le geometral* (Paris, 1648), popularizing the geometrical studies of his teacher, Girard Desargues (1591–1661). In the initiating image, disembodied hands hold strings that lead to squares in an illustration of the geometric aspect of the visual pyramid. [Figure 32] Bosse transposes the disembodied hand with the seeing eye, depicted on the next page. [Figure 33] Like the drawing hand, the seeing eye selects the lines that frame its view.

Partaking in contemporary discussions of perspectivalism, Desargues' essays of 1636 and 1639 aimed to solve the problem of drawing in perspective without any peripheral pieces of paper to establish the sightlines laterally beyond the picture plane.²⁴ This would liberate the observer from a single point, as determined by Alberti. Desargues thus delocalizes the gaze, initiating a geometrical model projecting infinite spatial geometry rather than the finite one recognized in the surveyor's geometry used by previous theorists of perspective. His mathematical proof was identical to one central to ibn al-Haytham's argument describing the infinity of geometrical space.²⁵ This created a variable subject position of viewing similar to the displacement of the subject by the polyhedral isometric geometry common in Islamic surface treatments.

In contrast to the fixity of the Renaissance gaze underscored in Dürer's images, Bosse roots the perspectival gaze in multiplicity, unmooring its subjectivity. Yet this was precisely danger that Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) identified in the plurality of perspectives made possible through his identification of the "monad" as the model for the disembodied subject. He based this on Descartes' framework of sensory deprivation enabling his famous proof, "I think, therefore I am." In contrast to ibn Sina's association of oneiric truth as enabled by sensory deprivation, Descartes made sensory deprivation the unrealistic premise for wakeful reason (see Chapter 7.2). Building on this internalized, desensitized notion of self, Leibniz envisioned monads as individuated atoms, which had "no windows through which to come and go," thereby becoming self-determined. They became aggregate under a higher monad, vested with a soul, which places the monads into harmony. Leibniz uses the conceit of an overarching perspective achieved by God, the 'single universe,' to solve the problem of multiple perspectives. "Just like a city considered from different vantage points looks different every time, seemingly multiplied by perspective; likewise it so happens that an infinite multitude of simple substances will produce many distinct universes, which are nothing but

²⁴ Taton, 2008. ²⁵ Catastini, 2016.

alternative perspectives of a single universe, taken from the vantage point of each individual Monad.”²⁶ In contrast to ibn Arabi’s idea of unity of being (*wahdat al-wujud*, sometimes also *tawhid*), which emphasized the multiplicity inherent to the universal Divine, Leibniz’s multiplicity subsumed diversity in the monocular gaze of God.²⁷

In this context, Desargue’s observations became lost in the dominant ideology enframing perspectivalism – that of the monocular gaze of God. Instead, the retention of divine authority, even under a scientific system increasingly skewed toward the senses of Man, drove the relationship between the singular, ideally positioned Western subject and the perspectival image. Far from reflecting an increasing secularization of the world, it indicated a retrenchment in the principles of Christianity through a vocabulary increasingly distant from theology. The Christianate world could have used the perspectival interpretation of geometry to develop a multi-centered mode of viewing the world, similar in concept if not in form to the use of Islamic polyhedral geometry. The postulates based on a God-centered world precluded this development, and the West remained mired in a monocular perspective of the world, exported in the Western cultural hegemony accompanying colonialism.

By the nineteenth century, this monocular gaze no longer represented God. Instead, a perspectival view indicated ownership, both in the literal sense of land and the metaphorical, Hegelian sense of a prospect on history. This is exemplified in the frontispiece to the *Description de l’Égypte*, twenty-three large-format volumes of text and plates published between 1809 and 1829 to document and celebrate the information gathered by approximately a hundred and sixty scholars accompanying Napoleon Bonaparte’s armies in their abortive 1798 foray into Egypt. [Figure 34] The image presents an imaginary gateway, replete with symbols, framing a landscape marked by ruins. The gate frames the Napoleonic conquest of Egypt, symbolized in the open-winged motif at the top of the gate. Modern Egyptians pictured in the bottom relief are juxtaposed with a mythified Roman conquest depicted on the upper relief. A chain of battle insignia along the sides link modernity with antiquity. The image presents Egypt to the viewer through Napoleon as mediator. Yet Napoleon himself does not appear in this image except as an “N” in a round monogram. Rather, the large-scale engraving allows the viewer to imagine himself as surveying the scene as its new conqueror. Like the topographic maps lending the volumes military authority, the image offers a view “from a perspective where map

²⁶ Cache, 2011: 99; Cray, 1996: 50–52. ²⁷ Akkach, 2005a: 58–59.



Figure 34 Anonymous, frontispiece, vol. 1, from *Description de l'Égypte* by M. Jomard, 1809–1828. The New York Public Library Collections b14212718.

maker/reader could see everything and yet not be seen. From that vantage point, the map maker/reader is at a precisely defined distance from the subject and the subject is rendered an object.”²⁸ To this, the *Description* adds the visual veracity afforded by perspectival construction and new

²⁸ Godlewska, 1995: 17.

printmaking technologies to create a fantasy rooted in ancient monuments depicted as the only true Egypt, and thus depicting French civilization as its natural inheritor.

Celebrating the Napoleonic conquest of Egypt as the natural outcome of Enlightenment thought, Hegel may have considered the *Description* in developing Descartes' notion of scientific mastery as an expression of the sovereignty of modern man in his *Heidelberger Antrittsrede* of 1816.

Man, since he is spirit, may and should consider himself worthy even of the highest; he cannot think the greatness and power of his spirit great enough; and with this faith nothing will be so stubborn and hard as not to open itself to him. The essence of the universe, hidden and closed at first, has no power which could offer resistance to the courage of knowledge; it must open itself to him and lay its riches and depths before his eyes and open them to his enjoyment.²⁹

Just as the frontispiece uses antiquities to signify the riches of Egyptian conquest that would soon celebrate Empire in the Louvre Museum, Hegel presents the unraveling of knowledge as a visual pleasure opening itself up to the eyes of Man.

A century after the *Description*, in 1909, Gertrude Bell critiqued this mode of surveying the past from the perspective of the present: "We look upon a past civilization and see it not as it was, but charged with the significance of that through which we gaze, as down the centuries shadow overlies shadow, some dim, some luminous, and some strongly colored that all the age behind is tinged with a perspectival hue."³⁰ Perspective serves as a visual metaphor both for power and for history casting its gaze onto the past. Bell's sense of ownership over the antiquity she surveys is no less certain than that exhibited in the *Description*, yet at the same time it suggests a self-awareness that the impression of perspective alone does not assure a single truth enabled from the vantage point of the subject viewing the past from the present.

The symbolism accruing to perspective coalesced in Erwin Panofsky's 1924–1925 lecture "Perspective as 'Symbolic Form'" ("Die Perspektive als 'symbolische Form'"). His argument considers perspective as one of the a priori categories that Kant describes as prerequisite for aesthetic judgment, and which Riegl adopted in his notion of *Kunstwollen* as the immanent meaning of a sequence of artistic phenomena. His understanding of Ernst Cassirer's psychoanalytic concept of a "symbolic form," when "a symbolic meaning is attached to a concrete material sign and intrinsically

²⁹ Harries, 1974: 684; Pope, 2006. ³⁰ Quoted in Bernhardsson, 2005: 65.

given to this sign,” transformed perspective into a symbol for Western civilization that enables the modern worldview: “The arbitrariness of direction and distance within modern pictorial space bespeaks and confirms the indifference to direction and distance of modern intellectual space; and it perfectly corresponds, both chronologically and technically, to that stage in the development of theoretical perspective when, in the hands of Desargues, it became a general projective geometry.”³¹ Asserting “parallel chronologies” between technique and scientific knowledge, Panofsky used a quasi-mystical *Weltanschauung* to represent art as a surrogate for scientific knowledge, itself transparently standing in for civilization as a whole.³² His interpretation that “perspectival achievement is nothing other than a concrete expression [*Ausdruck*] of a contemporary advance in epistemology or natural philosophy” constructs a tenuous causality between the ‘conquests’ embodied in the dialectical progress of perspectival representation and European intellectual history.³³

Criticizing Panofsky’s analytical use of a psychoanalytic concept, Damisch nonetheless interprets Brunelleschi’s mirror demonstration as a Lacanian imago. Perspective allowed the world to move from “the drama of insufficiency” – that of the immature baby – “to anticipation” – of the subject seeking its maturation. Through this modernized social-psychoanalytic construct, he argues that representation became confused with reality as a developmental stage in the collective psyche of the West.³⁴ This anthropomorphization follows a tradition of likening the finite universe postulated by Aristotle and persisting in the medieval period with the womb and a subsequent birth (Renaissance) into modernity.³⁵ It also posits an aesthetic shift to perspective as a marker of cultural maturity. And what if a culture ignored perspectivalism? Would it ever mature?

This discursive tradition repeatedly treats perspective not simply as an attribute of Western art, but as exemplifying the qualities of Western civilization for which art functions metonymically. “Thus the history of perspective may be understood with equal justice as a triumph in the distancing and objectifying sense of the real, and as a triumph of the distance-denying human struggle for control; it is as much a consolidation and systematization of the external world, as an extension of the domain of self.”³⁶ Panofsky subscribes to Hegel’s understanding of the end of art as embedded in the shift from art as embodying meaning to art as enabling

³¹ Panofsky, 1991: 16, 70. ³² Damisch, 1995: 28.

³³ Panofsky, 1991: 17; Damisch, 1995: 20–27. ³⁴ Damisch, 1995: 116–117.

³⁵ Bardo, 1986: 444. ³⁶ Panofsky, 1991: 67.

reflective evaluation. In this framework, perspectivalism enables the religiosity once embodied in artwork to become a mere subject matter for human consciousness.³⁷ Thus the rational and secular gazes join together under the march of progress made possible by the temporal metaphor of perspective evolving across history.

Likewise, in a 1938 lecture, Heidegger establishes the distinction between the medieval and the modern through a perspectival paradigm:

The fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture. The word 'picture' [*Bild*] now means the structured image [*Gebild*] that is the creature of man's producing which represents and sets before. In such producing, man contends for the position in which he can be that particular being who gives the measure and draws up the guidelines for everything that is. Because this position secures, organizes, and articulates itself as a world view, the modern relationship to that which is, is one that becomes, in its decisive unfolding, a confrontation of world views.³⁸

Although perspectival rupture is naturalized through the mythologization of its Renaissance origins, the theorization of perspective as a rupture in human subjectivity took place in the early twentieth century, precisely when it lost its structuring force in painting. The moment that perspective ceased its function as the premier structuring device of visual representation, its elision with rationalism transformed it into a structuring device legitimating the European hegemonic world order. No longer symbolic of good art, it became symbolic of Western dominion.

Many recent scholars have reaffirmed perspective not simply as a tool of the Western tradition, but as a causal element in its (natural) ascendancy. Damisch suggests that perspective functions as an origin for specifically Western or European thought, in that "it suggests that a call for 'truth' was present, was at work, and that art provided, for the first time, a place for it to manifest itself."³⁹ Similarly, even as Martin Jay critiques the prevalent idea of perspective as a "scopic regime" with a singular expression of the nature of the subject, dividing it into several, more nuanced, scopic regimes, he warns against excessive critique:

In fact, if I may conclude on a somewhat perverse note, the radical dethroning of Cartesian perspectivalism may have gone a bit too far. In our haste to denaturalize and debunk its claims to represent vision per se, we may be tempted to forget that the other scopic regimes I have quickly sketched are themselves no more 'natural' or closer to a 'true' vision . . . However we may regret the excesses of scientism, the

³⁷ Panofsky, 1991: 72. ³⁸ Heidegger, 1977: 132. ³⁹ Damisch, 1995: 157–159.

Western scientific tradition may have only been made possible by Cartesian perspectivalism or its complement, the Baconian art of describing. There may well have been some link between the absence of such scopic regimes in Eastern cultures, especially the former [e.g. that of Cartesian perspectivalism], and their general lack of indigenous scientific revolutions.⁴⁰

Thus even in recent art history, perspective remains not simply a technique of the Western artistic canon, but a symbolic mark of intrinsic superiority over Eastern cultures which lack scientific growth, psychoanalytic maturation, or birth as that enabled by the solely Western province of Reason. As Damisch points out:

In the art of painting . . . perspective . . . has this in common with language, that in and by itself it institutes and constitutes itself under the auspices of a point, a factor analogous to the 'Subject' or 'person' in language, always posited in relation to a 'here' or 'there,' accruing all the possibilities for movement from one position to another that this entails . . . Incrementally perfected over time . . . no longer responding to changing needs emerging through the evolutionary process, it must be replaced by another one better adapted to those needs: if the role of perspective in the realm of representation were a thing of the past, which is far from a settled question, the model it proposes would still retain its pertinence, precisely as *model*, one that might serve thought in the project of discovering what, in painting, are the conditions prerequisite to the making of statements.⁴¹

He responds to an apparent anxiety emerging from the loss of perspective in the era of post-modernity by asserting its preservation as an underlying paradigm. As Margaret Iversen indicates, he proposes history as an echo chamber, constantly recast in light of the resonance of changing knowledge, and writes it retrospectively as a logical extension of consequences that enable a model.⁴² Perspective as a model (of reason, of modernity, of 'the West') must be preserved (in the third person, as if there were no agent, as if man or the critic has replaced God) at all costs as true, regardless of its supporting evidence. There is no alternative outside this narrative; there can be only one perspective, one image, one truth.

The irony is that perspective, like the reason it models, is based on an artifice. Like the Kantian objective observer, we view the world *as if* it were in perspective, then behave accordingly (see [Introduction 0.1](#)). We often see even the most perspectivally organized paintings from multiple points of view, yet we insist that perspective demands a fixed position. How has perspective become so integral to our symbolic world that we deny the

⁴⁰ Jay, 1988: 19–20; Damisch, 1995: 45. ⁴¹ Damisch, 1995: 53. ⁴² Iversen, 2005: 202.

evidence of our own senses? If perspective models reason, and is an artifice, then is reason an artifice as well?

Perspectival ideology gratifies the promise of modernity to replace God with reason by granting God's monocular gaze to our human selves. Perspective as an *imago* enables the confusion of representation with reality. This, according to Bosse, was the actual task of painting: not to depict things as the eye sees or believes to see them, but such as the laws of perspective impose them on our reason.⁴³ Perspective does not represent reason so much as we come to view reason according to a perspectival paradigm. Even in his celebration of perspective as the preeminent symbolic form of the Western tradition, Panofsky affirms the artifice necessary to construct the rational subject: "The perspectival view, whether it is evaluated and interpreted more in the sense of rationality and the objective, or more in the sense of contingency and the subjective, *rests on the will* to construct pictorial space, in principle, out of the elements of, and according to the plan of, empirical visual space" (emphasis added).⁴⁴ Much as the Brethren of Purity understand geometry as enabling comprehension of the divine, Panofsky considers perspectival geometry as enabling Man to take God's place in the order of the world: "Perspective, in transforming the *ousia* (reality) into *phainomenon* (appearance), seems to reduce the divine to a mere subject matter for human consciousness; but for that very reason, conversely, it expands human consciousness into a vessel for the divine."⁴⁵ As Iversen points out, for both Damisch and Panofsky the achievement of perspective is not its potency as geometric form, but as symbolic order: not mimetic, but conceptual. Perspective symbolizes the achievement of modernity because it enables Kantian objectivity to structure knowledge. This enables art to function through a critical distance imposed by Hegel, as a sign rather than as mimesis of the absent Real. These analyses propose a binary structure in which perspective becomes the only paradigm for space, and distance the only possibility for reason.⁴⁶ The appearance of objectivity through perspective naturalizes the assertion of human omnipotence. Thus represented through the distant subject who looks at, controls, and analyzes whatever lies before him – landscape, history, or painting – through the model of perspective, the scholarly critic also gains authority through the propriety of distance, disinvestment, and demonstrative rhetoric (see [Chapter 6.4](#)).

⁴³ Damisch, 1995: 116, 150.

⁴⁴ Panofsky, 1991: 71.

⁴⁵ Panofsky, 1991: 72.

⁴⁶ Iversen, 2005.

Panofsky's periodization of perspective as a single line of progress ignores the existence of non-Western cultures in which perspective played no role in either representation or reason. In the context of the 1920s, with much of the world under Euro-American economic and/or political imperialism, this elision of perspectivalism with rationalism naturalizes the rule of Western Man in the place of God. That it does so at precisely the historical moment that the use of perspective as a tool of artistic verisimilitude recedes underscores the persistence of perspectivalism as ideology, losing nothing of its content even when divested of its form.

To acknowledge the potential of rational space without perspective would necessitate acknowledging that using it as a paradigm for reason produces an ideology – a concept in which Marx again repeats the optic metaphor: “If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.”⁴⁷ His paradigm recalls the paradox of the mirror in Brunelleschi's original model, representing reality by looking away from it. Such an inverted image can only be corrected through intellectual recognition that observes from outside the optical frame. If the pretense of perspective to represent natural vision is merely an ideological illusion, then the naturalness of the attitude it embodies turns out also to be a sham. Perspective connotes the ‘West’ because it relies on a mythology, in the sense described by Barthes, that transforms history into nature.⁴⁸

This myth persists as a dominant model in the conceptualization of universal reason. It implies that Western reason takes an objective, outward-looking stance at the world. Yet the modern conceptualization of reason in European philosophy depends on inversion and introspection rooted in Catholic theories of divine omnipotence and in dreams. Finding some roots in Islamic thought, it cannot even be conceived as entirely Western. Like the supposedly Western technique of perspective, reason may be less rational, and less Western, than it initially appears.

Marx's metaphor of the camera obscura follows a long legacy of spatial metaphors for the mind. Distancing the body from vision, the camera obscura produces an isolated, enclosed, and autonomous viewer. This metaphysics of interiority produces a nominally free, sovereign individual, a privatized subject in the quasi-domestic space of the mind. John Locke (1632–1704) considers the external senses as windows that let light into the

⁴⁷ Marx, 1998: 36. ⁴⁸ Barthes, 1972: 128.

dark room of the mind, likened to judicial chambers, where the understanding of man finds images lying around.

Similarly, Descartes compares a dissected eye to a room with a camera obscura. Crary comments:

By this radical disjunction of eye from observer and its installation in this formal apparatus of objective representation, the dead, perhaps even bovine eye undergoes a kind of apotheosis and rises to an incorporeal status. If at the core of Descartes's method was the need to escape the uncertainties of mere human vision and the confusions of the senses, the camera obscura is congruent with his quest to found human knowledge on a purely objective view of the world.⁴⁹

Crary interprets this as Descartes' model for the mind, expressed in his second meditation:

I will now close my eyes, I will stop my ears, I will turn away my senses from their objects, I will even efface from my consciousness all the images of corporeal things; or at least, because this can hardly be accomplished, I will consider them as empty and false; and thus, by holding converse only with myself, and closely examining my nature, I will endeavor to obtain by degrees a more intimate and familiar knowledge of myself.⁵⁰

If Descartes' mind is a room, it lacks the aperture essential for a camera. Unlike the mind envisioned by Locke, Descartes excludes images or any residual sensory impressions. His reason is singularly a-sensory. Indeed, his emphasis on mathematics as the foundation of reality over that of the senses is underscored by his metaphor for binocular vision as a blind man divining the world with two canes. Such internalized thought informs Hegel's suggestion that "Thinking takes thinking for its point of departure as something certain in itself; it does not depart from something external, or from something given, or from some authority, but simply from this freedom, which lies in the 'I think.'"⁵¹

Central to Descartes' concept of thought is the preference to look inward, not outward. Paul Ricoeur considered Cartesian thought through a peculiarly perspectival description, as "contemporaneous with a vision of the world in which the whole of objectivity is spread out like a spectacle on which the *cogito* casts its sovereign gaze."⁵² Yet the only infinity Descartes surveys lies inside, not outside, and it leads him to proof of the existence of God, not to a world surveyed by Man. He envisioned a purely mathematical reality contrasting sensory deception. Ricoeur's statement is not

⁴⁹ Crary, 1996: 48. ⁵⁰ Descartes, 1912: 95. ⁵¹ Harries, 1974: 685.

⁵² Crary, 1996: 48 n. 52.

incorrect, in that he declares Descartes' thought as contemporaneous with and not causal to perspectivalism. In contrast, Martin Jay's phrase "Cartesian perspectivalism," which effectively sums up a modern conflation of perspectivalism with the self-sufficiency of reason attributed to Descartes, ignores the deeply religious context in which Descartes developed his thought and, like ibn al-Haytham, contemplated the relationship between scientific method and faith in an absolute God.

Descartes even casts the continuity of the self as an illusion, constructed through memory, as no instant can have any duration. For him, this proves God as necessary to hold the moments together, providing the illusion of duration and causality that the senses fool us into understanding as inevitable. Taking up an occasionalist position, Descartes attributes free will not to the individual, but to God: "Since the whole time of life can be divided into innumerable parts, each single one of which depends in no way on the remaining, from the fact that I was shortly before, it does not follow that I must be now, unless some cause as it were creates me anew at this moment, that is conserves me."⁵³ The independent self is an illusion, perennially reconstituted by God, so free that he might even malevolently disturb this order at will. Far from asserting free will, Descartes argues that he must "always conquer myself rather than fortune, and change my desires rather than the order of the world."⁵⁴ His notion of vision as internal reverberates with that of ibn Arabi, who defined visual perception as "a meaning that God creates in the eye according to what the viewer wants to see from visible things."⁵⁵ Adopting the (baffling) current equation of Cartesianism with empiricism, Akkach describes ibn Arabi's thought by saying, "This non-Cartesian view shows how the soul was seen to be capable of effectively shaping external reality according to his inner desires."⁵⁶ Surprisingly, far from oppositional, both emerge from parallel philosophical roots as developed through intertwined (trans-) religious mystical interpretation.

Basic issues that Descartes raises – skepticism resolved through self-awareness, the infinity of the divine, imagistic memory, and the knowability of God through the action of memory – lay in theological premises essential to Christian Platonism and strengthened through scholastic engagement with Islamic and Jewish philosophy.⁵⁷ Like Descartes, the fifteenth-century cleric Nicholas of Cusa located God in the mind.⁵⁸ He writes:

⁵³ Schmaltz, 2008: 72. ⁵⁴ Descartes, 1912: 21. ⁵⁵ Akkach, 2005b: 119.

⁵⁶ Akkach, 2005b: 119. ⁵⁷ Schmaltz, 2008. ⁵⁸ Harries, 1973: 30.

Insofar as the prime image of everything is written in the mind, like truth reflected in its image, the mind, when judging what lies exterior to it, possesses in itself what it is looking at and what it conforms with . . .

The human mind comprises in advance all that it is able to discover in the outside world, and everything the mind finds in itself stands true – provided that it is a genuine mind, that is, a realization of man’s ability to gain similarity to the rolled-up basis of the world, its Nothing.⁵⁹

Although he found each individual perception limited by partial awareness, Nicholas of Cusa saw humans as images in God’s mind, the oneness of which secured the possibility of human subjectivity. In this, his thought differed considerably from that of ibn Arabi, who reserved full subjectivity for God.⁶⁰ Yet both mystical systems, inspired by a monotheistic interpretation of Platonic thought, offered parallel solutions to the problem of individual subjectivity rooted not in pure reason but in the necessary relationship with God. The similarity of their concerns may not be coincidental: Nicholas of Cusa may have encountered the thought of ibn Arabi while studying Islam, spending a year in Constantinople, in the interest of ending religious wars.⁶¹

Although Descartes’ thought resonates with the optical tradition of ibn al-Haytham and the Catholic tradition of Nicolas of Cusa (which may have some inspiration from ibn Arabi), he cites only one source: his own dreams.⁶² This foundation asserts his agency as an independent subject, so skeptical that he can even doubt the boundary between physical reality and dreaming as a potential trick of God. As if this origin were not unempirical enough, the only surviving source for the dreams is Baillet’s 1691 biography of Descartes.⁶³ Go figure: the basis of Cartesian reason lies in the lost transcript of a dream experienced half a millennium ago.

Why does this matter? While credence in dreams shocks our contemporary sensibilities, Karsten Harries points out that a Baroque audience would have found such a source unremarkable. It may be that the modern interest in producing Descartes as a father of something we call “Western reason” has refashioned him anachronistically, in the image of the modern. Acknowledging this does not change the power or effects of Descartes’ arguments, but it does suggest that Western reason is, like all ideologies, born in hindsight through its narrations, and nowhere as purely “Western” or modern as its teleologies might want it to have been.

⁵⁹ Smirnov, 1993: 72. ⁶⁰ Smirnov, 1993: 80. ⁶¹ Costigliolo, 2011. ⁶² Harries, 1973: 28.

⁶³ Browne, 1977.

What differentiates Descartes the most clearly from his predecessors is the juxtaposition of his philosophy with experimental method rooted in geometry. His approach resembles ibn al-Haytham's interest in reaffirming the atomistic interiority of the divine while supporting his analysis of optics with extensive experimentation rooted in the independence of the observer, one of the primary hallmarks of modern empiricism. Yet rather than recasting paternity of scientific method from Descartes to ibn al-Haytham, a more accurate approach would recognize experimentalism as emerging from intertwined discursive, historical, and religious frameworks. For the search for origins is always interested; it always comes from a specific place that defines truth through its own position and, in doing so, defines the alterity between 'us,' positioned correctly in relation to the picture plane of history, and 'them,' defined by the degree to which their subjectivity is askew. Like the attribution of the origins of perspective to the name Brunelleschi, the attribution of modern reason to the name of Descartes offers a clear patrimony for the modern Western tradition. Its ideological force tempers its historical inaccuracies.

The mythology of perspectivalism makes the West appear like the sole natural outcome of history, despite the distortions through which we view it. What does it mean to look at history through a lens that can only be corrected through our awareness of its inversion? What happens if we look instead from a tradition rooted in an infinite network of focal points corresponding to an equal plurality of subjectivities? If the centered, individual subjectivity that we identify as 'Western' corresponds to the subject as constituted through the perspectival representation of space, how can we describe the subjectivity that corresponds to the Islamic engagement with the same mathematical precepts? The "private way of looking" Necipoğlu proposes precludes the single-point perspective from the epistemological structure constructed through Western perspectival thought. We may not be able to put 'the Islamic' in focus because that notion of focus is itself an illusion of perspective; but this intrinsic conceptual multiplicity has no less of a hold on reality. What might it mean to look at the world out of perspective? What happens if we replace the perspectival metaphor at the heart of art history with one based on the decentered subjectivity of polyhedral isometric geometry?

Conclusion | Out of Perspective

Art history often stages a peculiar estrangement: it invents the category of its analysis. While the objects investigated by Islamic art historians go back centuries, the category of 'Islamic art' depends on modern understandings of Islam and art as discrete and definable categories. The resulting practice claims to familiarize culture, but does so on its own terms. No amount of information about an attractive object can explain the nuances of that attraction, any more than the name, dates, nation, and hair color of a person can explain their being. If we look in awe at a palace, the story of its construction can induce admiration for architects or political leaders of its era. This can impress with historical grandeur and frame modern nationalism. But it will not tell us anything about how we experience enchantment. It will not tell us how the work produced meaning to the people who have experienced it across time. We can taxonomize and chronicle all we want, and yet we will come no closer to understanding how our fascination functions, or how it overlaps or diverges with the encounters of others.

The disciplinary demand to convert the pleasure and curiosity born of our senses into a desire for historical knowledge is profoundly political. It situates us in a world where meaning comes not from discursive associations or internal experiences, but from measurable information. It transforms expression into competition through paradigms such as those of artistic genius or national prowess. Subjects are invited to project their own identities into a relationship with a historical imaginary, conceived either as their own (in nationalism), admirable (in an ally), or alienating (in a foe). Blind to its own ideological agency, this conversion from sensation to historicism obviates other frameworks of meaning. It considers the experiences of perception as so personal that they cannot be described, and yet also paradoxically transparent and universal. This persists despite libraries full of books transcribing discourses replete with insight into the sensory and supra-sensory experiences of other times and places, engaged through eyes, ears, and hearts, sung out in poetry and painting, melodies and their rhythms. The terms of our fascination are not private, personal, or universal, but constructed through such contexts.

We can discover the perceptual contexts of Islamic art beyond history. We can interpret them. They are no less measurable than names and dates, materials and trade routes. And if in the process of our interpretation we come to disagree, the ensuing discussion is precisely the discursive space in which these cultures come to life – not frozen as legacies attached to geographies, but in the layered space built up between the notes that embody culture. If we are to know Islam, or any culture, through its creations, this discursive space is where it will reveal itself not as nation or identity, not as religion defined and described from outside or legislated from a self-appointed internal absolute authority, but as a realm emerging through its articulation.

The study of Islamic perceptual culture is distinct from, yet dependent on, art history. It respects the knowledge gained from a secular approach to the cultures of Islam, but questions the premise that a secularism gleaned from Christianate roots can apprehend a culture in which everything can be conceived within a relationship with the Divine. This inquiry renders contingent premises such as the centrality of vision, the role of the image, the importance of the object, the linearity of history, the centrality of matter, and the authority of perspective. In their stead, this study of perceptual culture looks to Islamic discourses for an alternative language through which to conceive the human encounter with the created world. On the one hand, these new concepts expand our understanding of Islam in its relationship with antique philosophy and neighboring religions. On the other, these methods transcend the category of Islam, providing potentially useful tools through which to develop transcultural epistemic models for global art history.

Featuring the agency of works over their physicality, the study of Islamic perceptual culture expands the concept of 'art' to include music, dreams, visions, and mirrors, both real and metaphorical. The shift from art to perception, production to reception replaces the exchange value of the commodity with the interactive sharing of discourse. We become less *what* we make than *how* we make, and what we do with that making. Rather than annealing history in the preservation of forms, the discursive preservation of ideas enables that which has been to persist in what becomes. Bergsonian duration gains methodological centrality over Hegelian historicism.

This study is not limited to the theorizations in this book. It emerges in the interplay of theories responding to the vast resources of interacting stories, secured in texts and enacted in practices that perennially bring Islam into being. This Islam is not a noun – a scripture, a history, a religion – but a verb. Grammatically a verbal noun, Islam is a speech act – an utterance that

performs what it utters, like the words “Welcome!” or “Behold!” Islam is the act of greeting (s-l-m) God not only in prayer, but potentially in all manifestations of the Divine. The study of perceptual culture invites us to recognize this practice as it is embedded in Islamic discourses, and to resist resisting expression of God in them regardless of our own creed [Plate 18]. Thus the boundary of its inquiry is not geographical or temporal, nor bound by the faith of an artist or a political rule under Islam, but framed by an artist or a work’s engagement with the discursive frame of Islam.

As a method, the study of perceptual culture combines visual, sonic, and literary traces to modify analytical practices. Focusing on reception over production, it undermines the value of distinguishing between media as a means of approaching culture. Featuring experience over materiality, it includes non-material entities such as music and dreams. Rejecting the hierarchy of the eye, it valorizes the ear and the heart as sensory organs. It recognizes the possibility of physical preservation only through the concomitant preservation of ideas. Recognizing the body as an agent, it undermines the hierarchical dualism between mind and body. Diminishing the agency of demonstrative prose, it embraces a full range of rhetorical tools, including the exhortative agency of the fable, the entertaining agency of the anecdote, the analytic agency of the image, and the mimetic agency of music. It invites us to invent a practice of cultural engagement that inhabits the unfamiliar rather than reporting on and thereby reconfiguring the exotic into familiar forms. These shifts offer new paradigms for the ways in which art history might function as a globalized analytical discipline. It invites us to leave the perspectival frame of art history and learn to perceive a world from multiple and mobile positions of authority.

The overarching power of perspective in the Western artistic tradition plays a central role in the difficulty of imagining meaning and subjectivity in the arts of other cultures, including that of Islam. As Stephen Melville explains:

The Renaissance achievement of rational perspective becomes the condition of possibility of the art-historical discipline, and we are compelled to its terms whenever we look to establish another world view that would not, for example, privilege the Renaissance, because we can neither ‘look’ nor imagine a ‘world view’ without reinstalling at the heart of our project the terms only the Renaissance can expound for us ... [Panofsky’s] valorization of perspective forges an apparently non-problematic access of the rationalized space of the past. We are freed then to imagine ourselves henceforth as scientist of a certain kind, and within this imagination the grounds of privilege become invisible and profoundly naturalized.¹

¹ Melville, 1998: 409.

This teleological assertion of objectivity renders any other understanding of the world impossible. The art history of every culture necessarily becomes mapped onto a method that takes Western perspective as its paradigm. To be out of perspective, then, means to have an art as well as a history that can only be properly viewed by taking on the subject position of the West. Perspective lies at the heart of the presumption of universalist modernism: that the non-West can only articulate its own reality by erasing any episteme of engagement with the world that fails to conform to the perspectival paradigm implicit in 'point of view.' In adopting modern subjectivity universalized along the European model, premodern and/or non-Western subjectivities become subaltern: rendered mute because even as they speak of themselves as the 'native subject,' the only symbolic language with which they can legitimately speak is predetermined elsewhere.²

Bryson suggests that this neutralization of cultural difference becomes natural through the competitive model underscored in Goethe's adoption of the Zeuxis story.

The 'Zeuxian tendency' of Western painting is only one expression of a generalized social process to which all members of the 'community of recognition' must submit. Where before, in elementary domination, history could be written in terms of one body's mastery over another, and *combat* could be seen as the principal mode of social interaction, in secondary or managerial domination the emphasis passes from ... dispersed feuding ... to a collective arena whose prime focus is no longer the body, but the signifier, and where *recognition* is the principal mode of interaction. All must submit to public acknowledgement of certain legitimating explanations of the social formation and to certain discursive formations, yet submission is no longer a capitulatory yielding up to control, as in combat, but rather acceptance on the part of each agent of a *weight* of consensus that is standard throughout the community, and which presses upon each agent to the same degree.³

The history of Islamic art history demonstrates such acquiescence. It signifies a shift from the physical domination of colonialism, reinforced through the metonymic device of collection, to the consensual domination of the Cold War era indicated through acceptance of the epistemic framework governing history and its objects. It has readily accepted the disciplinary premises through which it emerged: the periodization of Islamic culture as distinct from precedents, neighbors, and a supposedly universal modernity modeled on European experience; the segregation of religious

² Spivak, 1999: 282. ³ Bryson, 1983: 160.

and unknowable Islam from relatable cultural practice, embodied in art and conceived as secular; the limitation of meaning to demonstrative information; the disinterested subjectivity locating meaning in origins over reception; and what Foucault calls the “metaphysics of the object ... of that never objectifiable depth from which objects rise up towards our superficial knowledge,” prioritizing things over thoughts and imagination.⁴ Art history promotes an understanding of Islam as a category within the nexus of civilizations for which art serves as proof of being civilized, in which “non-modern people are invited to assess their adequacy.”⁵ In the modern era, submission to this order indicates participation in the global community. Like membership at the United Nations, it offers security through a purported equivalence nonetheless dominated by clearly defined major players. As long as assimilation rejects the equivalent value of all sides; as long as it models communication on conflict rather than on cooperation; as long as it presumes a system of engagement between parties with preexisting rules established by one side, it is always already a lie.

This system is outmoded and unsustainable. Robert Nelson points out that

[The histories and classifications of art history] replicate nineteenth-century histories and classifications that derive in part from versions of Hegel’s progressive unfolding of the Absolute Spirit from the dawn of history in the unchanging East to its realization in the progressive European nation-state, which for Hegel was Prussia. That narrative is both nationalistic and teleological, and it belongs to a culture that is waning. Our contemporary world has many centers and cultures. They produce and have produced art, not to serve a teleological development that leads to a Euro-American present of modernity or postmodernity, but for utterly different patrons and audiences.⁶

Revision of this Euronormative perspective cannot, however, simply emerge by adding multiple centers. Each discursive frame renders a new episteme through which to reconsider not only itself, but the entire world.

The study of perceptual culture discards perspectival historicism and the objectivity it claims while valorizing an embodied subjectivity. We no longer act *as if* disinterested, distanced, or static. Instead, we allow for the meanings embodied simultaneously in emotional and physical selves conditioned by multiple cultural contexts. How can stepping out of perspective allow us to imagine an alternative to art history? What happens if we enable a paradigm based on isometric geometry to rule the roost instead?

⁴ Foucault, 1994: 244. ⁵ Asad, 2003: 14. ⁶ Nelson, 1997: 39.

To look at the world out of perspective allows us to experience it in its dazzling, perplexing, vertiginous cornucopia of meaning. Subjectivity rooted in a shifting focal point rejects the gaze of mastery. It limits the authority of any individual as each adjacent subjectivity challenges its mastery of a uniquely authentic position. To look from one place becomes infinitely insufficient. Qazvini points this out in considering the failure of a reflection to remain constant as the observer moves. He explains: "What is real does not change its place because of a change in the position of the observer, but is fixed."⁷ The weakness of the perspectival gaze, and the propriety of the subjectivities it perpetuates, becomes evident in how easily it can be knocked out of kilter by simply stepping to the side.

The purpose of such an anamorphic view can never be to reestablish a new paradigm of mastery. To valorize a multivalent subjectivity as properly Islamic would merely replace one cultural hierarchy with another. It would insist on a unique center that would, ironically, repeat the problem of perspectivalism. Multifocal subjectivity does not produce identity. Rather, it functions as a tool. Like the a-centered system proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, such subjectivities function as "finite networks of automata in which communication runs from any neighbor to any other, the stems or channels do not preexist, and all individuals are interchangeable, defined only by their *state* at a given moment."⁸ Such a system belongs to nobody and could come from any source. Just as it might be modeled through Islamic pattern, it could be conceived through the Jain concept of *anekantavada*, which, in recognizing the complexity of truth, advocates for intellectual and religious pluralism. Would this imply a relationship between Islam and Jainism? Perhaps, but the question is irrelevant to the issue of method. Rather than learning *about* cultures, we need to learn *from* them.

To practice art history out of perspective necessitates a profound reorganization of how we situate knowledge of the Other through art, and in doing so, how we also situate knowledge in constructing a collective sense of self. Such a practice would allow for Islamic thought to function outside of the express boundaries of faith. This would mean that the study of Islamic – or Korean or West African or Inuit – art would not only constitute a regional specialization, but would offer an element in the toolbox of how humans extract meaning from experience. Much as premises rooted in Christian theological and aesthetic practices incarnate in secular art history have enriched our understanding of the world, the

⁷ Berlekamp, 2011: 105. ⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 17.

conceptual premises of various perceptual traditions can only enrich our engagement with experience in producing our own self-expressions. This enables a culturally egalitarian field for multiple epistemic games, each of which brings and shares its own rules as if sharing food at a picnic.

This approach would suit al-Jahiz's interest in preserving meaning through reuse over mere object preservation, suggested also through the story of the mirror of Adam. Described by Ahmad ibn al-Rashid ibn al-Zubayr in *The Book of Gifts and Rarities*, compiled in the fifteenth century from an eleventh-century source, the story was reprised in the sixteenth century by Dust Muhammad. It relates that God gave Adam a fragment of a mirror to view his offspring. One version claimed that a governor under the Umayyad caliph Mu'awiya had received it as tribute from a king. From him, it passed to the Abbasids. A second version said that it had belonged to Solomon, who had retrieved it from the devil, and passed to the Jews, who had given it to an Umayyad caliph during the wars with the Abbasids. This caliph, Marwan, would then rub it, place it on top of another mirror, and see things that displeased him. So he threw it away and beheaded the leader of the Jews. One of Marwan's slave-girls took it, and thus it eventually entered the treasury of the Abbasid caliphs, where it was lost.⁹ The object becomes a signal not only of what it reveals at any given moment, but of its layered inheritance through the vagaries of fate across time and place. A trope which shifts between mirror and cup in various tellings, associated with diverse figures including the mythological Persian hero Jamshid, Solomon, Kay Khosrau, and Alexander the Great, the world-viewing glass destabilizes the object both in its ontology and in its history, leaving it to be identified only its capacity to facilitate perception.¹⁰ Like the flute of al-Farabi, it adjusts its form in accordance with the need it encounters.

Multifocality offers convergent and divergent understandings of the world. It moves along interconnected lines of flow from position to position, like branches of a river that separate and meet, merging with other rivulets and accumulating meaning from multiple epistemological systems. It swims from lake to lake. We may never be able to solidify our gaze on a truth trapped in this mobility. Yet the perennial engagement of the world with the infinite multiplicity of discourse may give us more insight into truth than a subjectivity that assumes an authority guaranteed by immobility.

⁹ Hoffman, 2008. ¹⁰ Berlekamp, 2011: 91–92.

The alternative to multifocality becomes disembodied, a mirror always reflecting from and upon a position ever capable of re-situation. Rather than affirming humanism, it occupies the human ephemerally. As Jalal al-Din Rumi explains: “I have become as plain as a mirror with no image upon it. When I had desire for roasted lamb’s head, and when it became a ‘craving,’ I knew that it was from that fellow. A mirror has no image: if an image appears in a mirror it must come from something else.”¹¹ To be out of perspective enables reflectivity by temporarily absorbing the desire of others. This embodied space of desire, rather than disinterest, replaces the standard of objectivity as the locus of judgment.

Rational perspectivalism offers a means of taking in the external world and representing it, but as Uccello and Dürer suggested, at the cost of denying the self. By the modern period, this cost became a boon, enabling the discursive elevation of art to ‘science.’ If adopting perspective forces us to abandon our bodies, abandoning perspective takes us to bed, to the rejected realms of woman, body, sleep, dreams, music, sex, and desire. An art history based on polyhedral isomorphic pattern imbues the desire of the other as part of the self, then willingly lets go and moves on. It is light-footed and light-hearted.

An art history out of perspective reframes competition as collaboration. It provides knowledge not in the episteme of the preacher, but of the symposium. It embeds perception in experience shared, like wine, among a community extending beyond the knowledge of objects. It grounds perception not in art, describing the culture of another, or in history, placing things in their proper sequence, but in the simultaneity of presence – both of those with whom we share experience and of the experiences we bring to the practice of perception. It ceases to take an appropriate distance from its object of study. It hears and touches, smelling the roast lamb of somebody else’s desire. It valorizes the senses emphasized in poetic descriptions of experiencing Islamic perceptual culture: the scent of ambergris lingering in ink, the iridescence of pages as they turn, the combination of wine, music, and companions accompanying the sophisticated pleasures of a *majlis*, careening dangerously between the forbidden and the divine.¹²

Rooted in the reflective heart, such an art history would take symbolic language as seriously as demonstrative, faith as seriously as fact. A story like that of Adam’s mirror resituates subjectivity. It supplements history with another mode of knowledge, allowing us to place works not only in

¹¹ Rumi, 1994: 42. ¹² Shortle, 2018: 23–24.

the contexts of politics but in that of the imagination. There, works function through an interplay of the senses. Music or poetry may serve as a better conduit for a painting than a label with dynastic and geographical information. Geometry may function as music and thereby as image. Painting may articulate commentary on text. As Graves points out, objects that allude to other states of being may function not through the representational trope of language, or the categorical distinction between text and form naturalizing the modern distinction between mind and body, but as signifiers through an “intellect of the hand.”¹³ The identity of an object may not lie only in its historical, but only in the plenitude of its intellectual and bodily setting.

Understood as concept rather than commodity, culture, thought, and belief can be owned by all with loss to none. They are magically suspended in and between the potential infinity of our sharing. Cultures function not in discrete units, but as mobile interactive spheres. The recognition of this multiplicity situates us all in a perpetual exile in the world. It thereby offers a means to welcome everybody home. By building a culture based on the symbolic sharing of passions, we may contribute to a world of physical compassion. We may recognize the need to share our materiality. This hope renders the unfamiliar not as foreign, but as an enriched expansion of ourselves. Not simply to tolerantly shake hands with the Other who has already come halfway to us through the ladder afforded through a disciplinary perspective, but to climb together, building unforeseen ladders. Multiplicity enters us not as something alien, but as a form of nourishment through which we can approach the world anew, refreshed as though through slumber.

If geography and time are the warp and weft structuring (art) history, perceptual culture is like the pile of a velvet cloth that, without altering the warp or weft of the fabric, reenchants its texture and depth. It treats Islam as the Simurgh, and objects as its feathers. Like the galleries in China full of representations futilely and obsessively trying to reconstruct the bird from its feathers, the museum is a monument to our inability to feel what we are trying to represent. And yet like the three princes seeking the hand of the Chinese princess in the gallery of creation, we can also discover through objects the spirit we can never expect to pin down in our hands.

With these hopes tucked in between the warp of evidence and the weft of interpretation, this book would like to quote a certain textile from a very long time ago:

¹³ Graves, 2018: 215.

I exist for pleasure; Welcome!

For pleasure am I; he who beholds me sees joy and well-being.

This book offers complex more than simple pleasures: its many questions diverge and converge, offering iridescence to our certainties. It puts forth the pleasure of using thought as steel wool polishing our mental acumen, enabling perception beyond predetermined realities. It may be that a *barzakh* exists somewhere between the secular and the sacred, a peninsula of understanding in which we enter the cave of our *ghurba* and become in the world but not of it. If we tread lightly with a pure heart cleansed in the mirror of curiosity and wonder, it may just open its doors a bit and let us explore the glory it holds inside.

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